Conflict and Consensus • In Memoriam: Linda Joseph

# Communities

Life in Cooperative Culture

Fall 2021 • Issue #192


# CONSENT

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# WANTED: Magazine Ambassadors


**Dear friends of Communities,**

We are seeking individuals who are excited about finding readers for Communities. We have a substantial back stock of certain issues and are offering several ways in which you can obtain and distribute them, either to members of your home community, to friends and neighbors wherever you live, to fellow students or work colleagues, to attendees of events, or to visitors at other places where people who resonate with this magazine may be found (food co-ops, alternative bookstores, community centers, etc.).

**We can send a mix of back issues, determined partly by your preferences, to any address in the US**. The most economical way to ship them (since Media Mail is no longer available to us) is in Medium Flat Rate Priority Mail boxes. Each box can hold **30 to 40 magazine copies**, depending on the issues included.

We ask only that you then **share them or distribute them for free** (or by small donations to cover your postage costs) to people who are prime candidates to be Communities readers. Perhaps you want to increase awareness in your home community about some particular group-dynamics theme that Communities has covered. Perhaps you want to start a neighborhood conversation about how to adapt to climate change. Perhaps you want to seed Communities into a larger network or gathering you're part of. Perhaps you want a supply of conversation-starters to hand out on your travels. Whatever the case, we'd like to help you. You will also be helping us, by getting our many extra copies of Communities out of cardboard boxes and into the hands of people who can appreciate them.

We ask for a **sliding-scale rate** that, at minimum, covers shipping costs for the copies you request. If it doesn't matter to you what issues you receive, we ask for **$20-$50 per box**. If you have specific requests about the copies to be included, we ask for **$35-$100 per box**, depending what you can afford and depending on our supplies of the issues in question. We also invite you to contact us at **editor@gen-us.net**, as these are only guidelines and we want to work with you to distribute extra copies while also not undermining the available back issue stock necessary to fulfill specific individual orders.

Issues may not be shipped to you immediately, because magazine staff and the back-issue stock need to be in the same place for shipments to occur. We know that will happen in mid-October. It also may happen in late September. It will happen at other times as well, and we will fulfill orders as quickly as we can, but please be prepared for a little wait in case it is necessary.

You can contact **editor@gen-us.net** for more details and you can also order at **gen-us.net/bulkbackissues**.

## Why This? Why Now?

The last year-and-a-half have not gone "as planned" for anyone, and that includes us.

We on the Communities staff and in the GEN-US circle anticipated being able to attend many of the community-oriented gatherings that happen regularly around the country, bringing sample magazines with us to find new readers and subscribers. We also anticipated that the editor's home community itself would be hosting such gatherings, as it always has. For that matter, we anticipated that the editor would be living in his home community, able to organize the abundant print back issue stock and actively cultivate distribution of it.

Because of circumstances beyond our control (the pandemic and family illness), none of those things were able to happen. Throughout much of the pandemic, we continued to anticipate that after the passage of a few months, conditions would return to "normal" and the above would hold true again. Therefore we ordered generous amounts of each new issue, which, combined with the substantial amounts of many back issues we still have on hand, mean that an entire wall in the back middle office at Lost Valley Educational Center is stacked high with magazine boxes.

While this thermal mass helps moderate temperatures in the office, we believe it would be more valuable out in the world, being read. Please help us!

Again, please visit **gen-us.net/bulkbackissues**, and contact **editor@gen-us.net** with any questions or requests.

We believe the rest of this new issue speaks for itself. We hope you enjoy it!

Issue #192
Fall 2021

COMMUNITIES

# CONSENT



## ON THE COVER

Mixed messages coexist with deeper experiences of nature at a decommissioned reservoir in Oberlin, Ohio. Clear, unambiguous communication is an essential ingredient in consent, which is no laughing matter. Photo by Chris Roth.

# COMMUNITIES
Life in Cooperative Culture

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Chris Roth

Dear Readers,

With sorrow, we report the passing of Linda Joseph, Secretary/Treasurer of Global Ecovillage Network–United States, who played an irreplaceable role in encouraging and facilitating the continuation of COMMUNITIES under GEN-US as new publisher after our final issue with FIC two years ago. As Publisher Liaison, Linda provided not only administrative support but also ideas, wisdom, moral support, and a community spirit that helped bring together everyone within its reach.

She worked closely with magazine staff as we navigated statistically unpromising waters (small-scale independent magazine publishing) successfully. Without her help, especially in the first year of starting up with GEN-US, it seems unlikely that the magazine staff (whose administrative skill sets did not include all those that were necessary) could have managed—at least not without major disaster. We had no disasters, but instead very gratifying successes. Her guidance helped not only set up sustainable systems of managing this publishing project, but instilled confidence in us moving forward. As time went on, while Linda's moral support continued unabated, we noticed that, fortunately, the major "transition" issues had been taken care of, with all systems running smoothly, so meetings did not need to be as frequent and Linda could focus more once again on others among her numerous projects.

We were still unprepared for losing Linda from the team, however, and even more so for the loss of her as a friend, ally, cheerleader for the magazine, and visionary, as well as tireless behind-the-scenes worker for this and other inspiring efforts all aiming to usher in more ecologically and socially sustainable ways for human beings to live on this planet.

Thanks to the groundwork that Linda helped lay, that work (both via this magazine and via many other projects she catalyzed and people whose lives she touched) will continue. But we'll miss her, as will numerous others, including most especially her community-mates in Colorado and her far-flung network of friends gained through decades of activism and community-building.

Diana Leafe Christian, who also played an essential role in the transition of COMMUNITIES to GEN-US (connecting the magazine staff to Linda and thereby GEN-US as potential publisher), has compiled a heartfelt memorial to Linda from some of Linda's friends and colleagues (see the final five pages of this issue). We hope you'll join in this celebration of a life well-lived. Even in the midst of mourning for what is lost, we hope you'll find equal measures of inspiration, from her example, to help make things better. She brought her unique gifts to a set of worthy causes—something that each of us can do, especially with one another's support.

Thank you, Linda.

# Exploring Cooperative Futures, Part Three: The Ties that Bind

Chris Roth

*See* Communities *#191 and #191.1 for Parts One and Two of this article series. See gen-us.net/ECF3 to read the entirety of the post excerpted below:*

Community, both as ideal and reality, has the capacity to transcend the usual boundaries. Not only in shared living, it flourishes in neighborhoods, at farmers' markets and food co-ops where enjoyment of common taste is recognized, on Facebook and social networking, in churches, social clubs, and social dancing.

The pace of life changes how we experience community. There are communities, both social and professional, where close friendships develop over years through annual meetings or events. If you've known someone intensely over 10 or 20 years, even though the total time you've spent together isn't more than weeks or a few months, they may be considered among your dearest friends.

Fifty-thousand people travel to Burning Man as though it is a visit to Mecca. Thousands have enjoyed our Dance New England summer camp to the point where our community extends to children who bring their children, and there is a flow of social events during the rest of the year—weddings, birthdays, baby showers, the passages saluting the end of lives; support when relationships go bust. ...

The richness of common bonds is right up there with the riches available through what is styled as entertainment—and a lot cheaper. Even in the most brutal and constrained circumstances, the choice to live with some measure of dignity and connection remains possible. ...

*To read the complete article, please visit gen-us.net/ECF3.*

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*Paul Freundlich has been an active participant and creator in the development of cooperative, communitarian, and sustainable alternatives for 60 years.*

# Consent Culture Requires Liberation from Oppression

*By Kara Huntermoon*

Heart-Culture Farm Community was founded by people actively engaged in creating consent culture. Over the years, we have evolved a series of policies that work to build strong female leadership, encourage men to be their true selves, and address issues of sexism.

Both men and women have been socialized to conform to the expectations of sexism and male domination. We acknowledge that creating a culture of true consent requires us to unpack the ways we soaked up the oppression in our upbringings. This is ongoing personal and interpersonal work. At the same time, oppression is perpetrated on an institutional level in society, and Heart-Culture Farm Community is an institution. We have been thoughtful about creating institutional structures, norms, and policies to address and counteract sexism. I list them below in roughly the order in which we adopted them in the community.

**Relationship-building before commitment.** We cannot know if we can live well together until after we have lived together. New residents always enter in a "renter" role, with month-to-month contracts. This helps us avoid a situation where we have to continue living with someone who is causing problems in the community. It also gives us structural power to insist on personal changes if needed. Security (co-ownership) only becomes available to a resident after three years minimum of living on the land. That security is based first on relationships built and conflicts resolved, and second on financial and legal agreements that grant rights and responsibilities.

**Co-ownership is individual.** Votes are individual. Even when a couple joins the community together, their ownership is linked to them as individuals, not as a couple or family. Each individual gets one vote. Taxes are reported as individual ownership percentages for each person.

**Make it safe to show when we struggle.** Some beliefs that are widely held by community leaders and long-term residents help make it safe to show when we struggle. One is that people are good. We believe that when good people do bad things, it is because we were hurt. We also believe that all people are hurt, and that we didn't ask to be hurt in these ways. We are responsible for making things right in our relationships now. Struggle is an important part of taking that responsibility seriously. We can openly struggle with each other and remember that we are all good and doing our best.

We believe that all people are hurt, and that we didn't ask to be hurt in these ways. We are also responsible for making things right in our relationships now.

**Listen to each other.** Listening is another important tool in making it safe to show when we struggle. Open, accepting, loving attention is more effective than advice or attempts to fix difficulties. When we openly show our struggles, and listen to each other with respect, we honor each individual's intelligence and capacity to address the problems they are facing.

**Learn about impacts of sexism on yourself and others.** Some of the problems we are facing are a result of sexism. When we learn about sexism and its effects on us, we can openly show our struggles and support each other in making choices that are different from the socialization of sexism.

**Avoid self-silencing scenarios.** Studies show that the number of females in a working group influences how often females speak; women will self-silence until they are a majority of the group's population. In other words, a group of six men and four women will have four self-silencing women, but a group of six women and four

men will have women who participate equally with the men. This is one result of sexism that is often invisible to all involved and is difficult to avoid without institutional changes.

On an institutional level, we can avoid self-silencing scenarios by paying attention to how many males and females are in each working group. Decision-making committees can be assigned with male/female ratios in mind. On a community-wide level, new residents can be accepted with attention on the current numbers of men and women in the community. Heart-Culture has a goal of maintaining a male-female balance: equal numbers of men and women, or majority female. Since adopting this goal, we have had significantly fewer occasions of male-on-female violence, both in microaggressions and larger incidences. Women speak more and are more likely to take on leadership roles. Men also report feeling safer and more accepted in an equal-sex or majority-female community.

**Recognize female caregiving work as work that benefits the community.** Under sexism, female caregiving work is not considered "work." This ignoring of the work involved is part of the exploitation of female labor. This includes childcare, eldercare, home health care for the sick, and emotional labor like mediation and listening to upset feelings. Many communities repeat this dynamic by having the same financial and work requirements of parents as they do of single adults.

At Heart-Culture, we acknowledge that caregiving work benefits the entire community. Childcare is counted towards community work requirements, even when that care is for one's own children. When we have a work party, adults who are parenting are counted to have participated.

Every adult is encouraged to form relationships with the community's children. Those relationships are understood to be of value in helping things go well.

Financially, families are charged utilities "per adult," regardless of the number of children in the household. That means single adults end up subsidizing the utilities of parents with children, since all utilities are paid from a common account.

Mediation and listening skills are highly valued at Heart-Culture. We are aware that we would not succeed in living together well without frequent greasing of the relationship wheels. While women generally enter the community with more experience in this arena, men who live here long-term typically learn how to do emotional labor as a result of living in a culture of listening and emotional vulnerability. We highly value the way men can then listen to other men, thus freeing women from doing the emotional labor for men (as is expected under sexism).

**Make sexual and domestic violence a community concern.** Intimate family violence is not a personal or family problem. Cultural expectations (and community consequences) influence the prevalence of intimate family violence. The community as an institution has a responsibility to address forms of violence that are not well addressed in the larger legal context. For example, rape, domestic violence, sexual assault, and incest are very hard to prove in a court system, because often the victim is the only witness. Communities can set up accountability systems that do not require proof "beyond a reasonable doubt."

We once asked a parent if she was hitting her child. When she asked why it was any of our business, we responded, "It could be none of our business, if you didn't live here." We expect community residents to be held accountable by the community for how they treat other community residents, including their own partners and children.

We insist that people suspected of family violence participate in community processes and follow expectations laid out by the community. In the past, these expectations have included taking parenting classes, anger management classes, or other personal growth and education opportunities; beginning therapy or counseling sessions; participating in Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meetings; and pursuing other resources from the larger community for supporting personal change.

*Nathan Nelson parents a community kid, Guiseppe.*

*Kara with daughter Myriad.*

Photos courtesy of Kara Huntermoon

We have also required physical changes such as moving into separate living quarters, bringing a third person to help with interactions, and temporarily restricting access to children from other families.

These intervention requirements are intended to be temporary, to support the effectiveness of long-term change efforts. If it becomes obvious that efforts at change are insincere or ineffective, eviction is still an option. However, we have had several residents who greatly appreciated the opportunity to be supported in making such changes. (We have also had several residents who moved out rather than participate in these community accountability processes.)

**Avoid institutional sexual exploitation of women (and men).** If your community needs to earn money to help with a project, making a "hippie swimsuit model" calendar to sell is not the answer. Young women are likely to enthusiastically "consent" to participate in such a project. This "consent" is not genuine, however, when we consider all the ways young females are set up to be sexually exploited by sexism. I remember how much I liked being "sexually attractive" when I was younger—it was one of few avenues to power I was able to access. Later I could admit that I was being harmed by the many exploitative interactions I had with men, but at the time I didn't have the maturity or perspective to understand what was happening to me.

I'm sorry to be a joy-kill here, but we need to consider how to create true empowerment, not sexual exploitation under the guise of "empowerment." True empowerment means images of women's bodies are not sold for the sexual pleasure of men. This requires us to think about how sexism operates in society, and make a conscious choice to avoid imitating it in our communities. We can make choices that communicate to young women that their value is not based on their physical appearance, but is rather inherent to their intelligence, creativity, caring, and capability.

**The next goal: financial safety nets.** Women, especially mothers, are often financially dependent on males (often husbands). While I support social containers that encourage working out problems and continuing in long-term committed relationships, women can be made very vulnerable to "staying" when they actually would leave if they had access to more resources. How can an intentional community create those resources and make them accessible to its residents?

How can we, as a community, build enough resources to support women in the vital community caregiving work that is so ignored and exploited by sexism and capitalism?

This question came up for me recently when my husband, the father of my two children and the family breadwinner, had an emotional reaction and said the word "divorce." Distraught, I shared my feelings with three community members in three separate conversations over the next few hours. They all said basically the same thing: "If he actually does that, we will do whatever it takes to make sure you stay right here, doing the unpaid farming and parenting work that is so vital, and your financial needs will be met. You will not have to go take a minimum-wage job away from your children."

Thankfully, divorce does not actually appear to be on my horizon. But the thought keeps resonating for me: How can we, as a community, build enough resources to support women in the vital community caregiving work that is so ignored and exploited by sexism and capitalism? How can we give women the resiliency to continue that work, even when patriarchal financial supports break down or become abusive?

**Oppression is institutional and systematic.** Intentional communities are institutions. As we create our "new culture" communities, we have a huge opportunity—and a great responsibility—to create institutions of equality. Doing so requires us to learn how sexism and other oppressions work. In some ways our community structures are restricted by law and lack of resources under capitalism. But in other ways we can break patterns of abuse and create resources for human liberation.

*Kara Huntermoon is a co-owner of the community land at Heart-Culture Farm Community, near Eugene, Oregon. She has lived at Heart-Culture for 14 years with her husband and two daughters. Kara teaches Liberation Listening, a form of co-counseling that focuses on understanding and ending systems of oppression.*

# Teaching Consent

*By Crystal Farmer*

Navigating consent is a life skill, but most children grow up without a clear understanding of how to obtain and give consent. Many parents throw consent in with the sex talk: "No means no." Some parents don't address it until after that child has been the victim of a consent violation: "Why didn't you say something?" Parents and adults who work with children should model consent from an early age to help them understand what consent is and what it feels like to not have consent.

The first thing that children should understand is that consent has both a mental and physical element. Our physical reaction, such as arousal, can often conflict with what is appropriate in a situation. Most romance novels and TV shows have people throwing themselves at each other at the slightest hint of attraction. In the real world, we can acknowledge our desires without acting on them. The most important part of obtaining consent is asking. Children should learn that someone may have the desire to hug, kiss, or have sex, but they have to ask the other person if that is ok first.

Adults must model consent around family members, who often force children into contact regardless of their desires. Whether it's hugging them, tussling their hair, or adjusting their shirt, adults can help children have a sense of control around what happens to their body. Children without this sense of control will grow up with unclear boundaries, which can lead to discomfort with saying "no" when they don't want to do something.

An easy way to think about consent is to go with your gut. Teach children how to center themselves, take deep breaths, and tune in to their bodies. Think of a situation where they really want to say yes. What does it feel like? Think of a situation where they want to say no. What does that feel like? Knowing how yes and no show up for them is an important first step to verbalizing those feelings.

Once we teach children how to feel into their bodies, we must recognize their agency and give them choices. That means, for example, asking what they want and then acknowledging their answer. If you're a parent, money and time will limit available options, so don't ask open-ended questions like what they want for dinner. Ask if they want mashed potatoes, corn, or whatever else you already have on hand. Ask them if they want to play soccer this year before you sign them up. Tell them that their shirt tag is sticking out and ask if it's ok to fix it. Children used to top-down control may flounder when these types of questions are asked—if they are stuck, propose one option and ask if they can live with it.

Teach children while they're young that while a "no" can hurt, it is a perfectly reasonable answer.

Agency also means recognizing children's feelings, no matter how irrational or impractical they seem. The fear of rejection is a huge motivator for adults when it comes to relationships and sex. Teach children while they're young that while a "no" can hurt, it is a perfectly reasonable answer. Model firm boundaries when your child cries

Photos by Chris Roth

or sulks about not getting their way. Say, "I see that you are sad, and the answer is still no." Acknowledging their feelings builds trust between you and them, and it helps them understand that rejection is not the end of the world.

Children inherently understand that the world is made up of power and privilege. When a teacher tells them what to do, they are conditioned to respond. This conditioning can complicate consent when people with more power push children's boundaries. A major learning from the #MeToo movement is that saying no is more complicated than just saying the words. People can lose their jobs and livelihood if they complain about harassment or inappropriate conduct. Women are often expected to laugh and smile at men who openly ogle them. It's important that children understand that they may find themselves in these situations. Instead of telling them to go on a crusade and burn bridges, help these future adults find people who can support and defend them. Teach them how to communicate about this sensitive issue so they can ask for a transfer, find a new boss, or set boundaries with the people harassing them. If we ourselves missed out on these skills, we can read books or work with a therapist or support group to learn.

Many consent violations come in intimate or romantic relationships. Teach children that loving someone doesn't mean enduring abuse. Those romantic novels and TV shows often demonstrate unhealthy and codependent relationships. Teach children to recognize the difference between a good relationship and a bad relationship, and help them learn to set boundaries and avoid toxic people altogether. Just as in the work world, people can be financially and emotionally dependent on people who are violating their consent, so help them know how to ask for help from friends or family. You can model these skills by talking about your own relationships and problem solving in front of them. If you're still figuring out how to do this, books like Melodie Beattie's *Codependent No More* and Harriet Lerner's *Dance of Anger* are two classics (directed at women) about how to recognize and leave bad relationships.

The most important thing we can do to encourage children to report consent violations is to believe them. That means not admonishing them when they wipe away a kiss from Grandpa. It means empathizing when they talk about a negative situation at school. It means not calling physical abuse "love taps." When a child says no, we must respect that even if our feelings are hurt. We must validate their gut reactions and support them when they use their voice. Teach them how to problem solve instead of fixing situations for them. When a child complains about a situation at school, ask them what they think their options are. Support them if they decide to address the situation on their own, and resist the temptation to go behind their back to notify the teacher or principal. Children need practice having those difficult conversations when the stakes are low, and they need the confidence to speak up even when they know things may not work out in their favor.

Children and adults struggle with consent, but there are ways to help us get better at it. If you have children in your life, don't hide the complexities of love and relationships from them. Let them see you set boundaries, deal with rejection, and ask for help. Above all, listen to the child when they tell you what's important to them. Support children in using their voices now, so that they can navigate the complicated world of consent in the future.

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*Crystal Byrd Farmer is an engineer turned educator from Gastonia, North Carolina. She is founder of Gastonia Freedom School, an Agile Learning Center for children with disabilities. She also serves as a board member with the Foundation for Intentional Community and is on the Editorial Review Board of* Communities. *Her book* The Token: Common Sense Ideas for Increasing Diversity in Your Organization *is out now. Crystal is passionate about encouraging people to change their perspectives on diversity, relationships, and the world.*

# Consent in Community

*By Crystal Farmer*

Photos by Chris Roth

Consent is a cornerstone in a society that values individualism and agency. Intentional communities should create clear policies and guidelines for dealing with consent violations to help members feel safe. Consent violations, which can be anything from unwanted touches and hugs to sexual assault, are traumatic, and that trauma can impact the entire community if not handled appropriately.

The role of the community is to recognize initial harm, prevent further harm, and help both people on their way to healing. All this has to be done in the real world of power and privilege. When the harmed person is LGBTQ+, disabled, or otherwise marginalized, they may not be believed at first. They may be seen as causing trouble or complaining about a situation that many others have endured. That person may react in ways that don't seem reasonable or appropriate. If they have unhealthy boundaries and coping mechanisms, they may lash out or cling on to those who offer help. If they don't have a strong support network of people they trust, they may isolate themselves or leave the community altogether. They need a community that will believe them and help them move forward through the healing process.

In many cases, the person who caused the harm may be well-liked and/or powerful; they may have committed multiple violations while the community ignored warnings from others. They may also be a "regular Joe" with whom people have never had a problem. Either way, the community must not treat them like they are evil. They will need support and empathy from the community along with a path forward. If they are ostracized without a transparent process, they will lose the opportunity for self-reflection. If they use their power to short-circuit actual accountability, they may leave the actual harm unresolved while burnishing their image.

The community should focus on healing relationships instead of outward symbols of justice. Restorative justice has been adopted by many as an alternative to the authoritarian and punitive systems used by the government. While these processes recognize the humanity of everyone involved, they are not always effective at restoring relationships. Two very public cases in the polyamory community demonstrate the ineffectiveness of these processes.

In 2018, sex educator Reid Mihalko was accused of pressuring Kelly Shibari into oral sex. Reid chose to enter an accountability process. A circle of Reid's friends and colleagues designed a feedback gauntlet and within a year declared Reid rehabilitated. Kelly did not participate at all, and it's not clear that she received any sense of "justice." Maybe she didn't trust the volunteer accountability partners who wanted to guide her. Maybe she felt shamed by the critics and casual observers who were fans of Reid. It's more than likely she wanted it all to just go away, and it did. Communities of various types still publish

and circulate Reid's "Safer Sex Elevator Speech," with a new line about recognizing power dynamics. Reid still does workshops and events, and he even added accountability processes to his list of topics.

In 2019, former partners of Franklin Veaux accused him of being abusive. Both Franklin and the survivors formed accountability circles, but the survivors' circle's aggressive actions toward Franklin's circle quickly led to a breakdown in communication. The survivors felt misled by their own circle, and they are no closer to repairing their relationships with Franklin. For his part, Franklin says that he is the victim of abuse from his former coauthor Eve Rickert, and that he is still being harmed by her actions. Restorative justice may be an effective tool if led by experienced practitioners, but it should not be seen as an easy way to get accountability.

Despite the uncertain terrain, there are guideposts for dealing with consent violations. Here are the best practices that I have seen:

• Form a Consent Circle. Recruit a team to design a process for reporting harm, following up on reports, and deciding on consequences. Make this circle independent of leadership and board so that circle members are not subject to pressure from those in power. The circle should be its own circle and not an additional responsibility of people serving on another circle.

• Have a transparent process for addressing harm. Allow community members to make confidential reports to the Consent Circle. The circle should have the power to interview everyone involved, and they should keep details of the events and their decisions confidential. A good process will give both the person harmed and the offender the opportunity to talk about the event and propose solutions. Having one person who interviews everyone and reports back will reduce the amount of time that is spent retelling the harm.

• Make clear guidelines for restitution and healing after harm. Add consent violations into your community policies and list a standard set of consequences based on the harm. The proposed consequences should be seen as fair and proportionate to the harm and not based on who is popular or well-liked in the community. Maintain confidentiality as much as possible so that those involved are not the source of gossip. Reassess policies and actions taken after every incident to look for areas of improvement.

• Train your community on consent. All ages of members should understand consent and its place in healthy relationships. Whether you talk about enthusiastic "yes," show the Consent Tea video, teach my Triangle of Consent, or use a curriculum such as Our Whole Lives, give your community a shared vocabulary for talking about boundaries and recognizing when they have been violated. Talk through cultural views of shame and responsibility that prevent people from reporting. Give your members access to professionals who can help process past violations.

Consent should not be treated like a black-and-white legal issue. Communities should acknowledge the complexity and create processes that treat everyone involved as decent people. When designing a process to handle consent violations, communities should learn the roots of restorative justice and the limits of its current practice before implementing them. They should also obey local laws around reporting assault, especially when vulnerable populations are involved (children, disabled, and the elderly are usually covered under mandatory reporting laws). Finally, communities should do an internal analysis of the privilege and power structures and cultural forces that may add barriers for those who do experience consent violations. In this way, a community can help those involved heal in the full embrace of those who love them.

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# The Red, Yellow, Green Game: Consent and Accountability at Home and in Community

*By Julia Taylor*

"Okay, you two. Are you up for playing a new game called Red, Yellow, Green?"

"A game?" My eight-year-old son and five-year-old daughter are intrigued by the idea. That's a good start. I have been desperate to find healthy ways to redirect their incessant bickering and continually escalating conflicts, usually involving unwanted touch. Finally, it has occurred to me to draw upon skills I have recently practiced in the consent workshops I have been attending.

I have become increasingly aware that my kids are missing skills for seeking and offering pleasurable touch and interaction with one another. The predominant pattern of their engagement seems to be antagonistic, unwanted prodding and harassing of the other. I have been asking myself, "Why is it like this?" Guiltily, I imagine it must be due to my (or my co-parent's—or the combination of our) poor modeling and/or lack of parenting skills.

I often find myself creating more harm and alienation with my reactivity to their fighting than helping to interrupt their patterns of violent interaction. Perfectionist parenting shame aside, I have wanted to support both my children and myself in being more caring, empathetic, responsive, and accountable with each other and to be better equipped with tools to handle these challenging moments of conflict.

Tendencies toward vying for dominance, disregarding each other's "yeses" and "noes," and resisting acknowledgment of the hurt caused by our actions are features of the patriarchal culture we've all been raised in. We have all been indoctrinated in this culture that utterly fails to provide us with the tools and skills we need to effectively engage in consensual and responsible interactions with each other.

Over the last several years, I have been deeply involved in studying and dedicating myself to the development of consent culture and new systems of accountability within Earthaven Ecovillage, where my family and I live. As someone who is receiving and interfacing with current consent violation reports in this community, I am acutely aware of the gross and pervasive lack of understanding of even the basics of what consent is, not to mention how to orient towards it and recognize what it feels like in our bodies.

"In this game," I tell my kids, "We take turns exploring what kind of touch feels good for each of us." I explain that one person is the person being touched and the other is the toucher. After a round we will switch roles so we can each get to explore both roles. The goal is to distinguish and respond to whether the touch is pleasurable, interesting, tolerable, or undesired for the person being touched.

Touch that feels good is "green." "Green" means "I am a yes to that touch continuing."

Touch that is currently unwanted, for whatever reason, is "red." It means "Stop, now," "No, I do not want that touch right now," or "That's my limit." When someone says "red" we stop right away and don't initiate more touch unless or until we get a go-ahead that they are up for being touched again.

Yellow is the rich territory between "Yes this is pleasurable" and "Stop, now." Yellow could be "This is starting to reach my edge of tolerance," or "I'm not sure if I am enjoying this but I am curious." It might be "I am interested in this but I need it to

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adjust (be slower, firmer, lighter…)." Yellow is a good time to get curious about what the person being touched is experiencing, what they are enjoying and not enjoying about the touch. This is where we can notice the nuances of when something pleasurable becomes ambiguous or unpleasant or when something unpleasant transitions into pleasurable.

My kids jumped right in, and were immediately engaged. What fascinating fun to see them exploring curious and responsive touch, listening to one another, and obviously feeling delight at being able to create and receive a pleasurable experience. It felt like a miracle come true! I had waited and yearned for this kind of breakthrough for what seemed like the entirety of their siblinghood.

I let them know that finding the other's "red" or "stop" is important. I shared that, to be able to trust someone's "green" or "yes" it helps to know that they are able to say "no" when their limits are reached. I also emphasized, as I watched them test the other's limits and try out some fast-paced surprise touch, that they needed to go slowly enough that the other person had enough time to respond whether they were red, yellow, or green for that touch.

Their creativity was inspiring to watch. Gentle brushes and wispy strokes, massaging rubs, pinches, scratches, squeezes, hair pulling. What was fascinating was the range of what actually was and wasn't pleasurable to each of them. There were surprises, like that one of them loved intense sensation (such as prolonged skin pulling) and wanted more, whereas the other had a hard "red" limit with similar sensations.

By the end, they were enjoying the pleasurable sensations so much that they created an additional color category of "blue" which was even beyond green and meant "Please keep doing what you are doing!"

They also got into being very specific about the flavor of colors they were experiencing—"green with a tinge of yellow" or "blue with green stripes," etc.

They experimented, then negotiated requests around what kind of touch they wanted to receive or explore giving. "Now I wanna try this!" "How does this feel?" It was clear that what one explored was informing and inspiring the interests of what the other was interested in exploring.

After the game, there was an obvious sense of satisfaction, sweetness, and a lasting shift towards cooperation and care for one another throughout the rest of the day. This brought so much hope to me of what transformation could be possible in what had become a relationship dynamic truly bogged down with antagonism.

Not surprisingly, the introduction of this game did not forever alter the long-standing antagonistic dynamic between my children. Three years later they still bicker regularly and I still have a hard time handling it. It hasn't been a cure-all, but it has been a turning point, a source of trust and embodied knowing that something else is possible. We know now that they have the capacity to pay attention and honor what the other is and isn't a yes to. They have the felt sense in their bodies of how good it feels to listen and be listened to; to be attended to with attunement and care; to have what does and doesn't feel good to them be responded to and matter to the other person.

Of course, building trust is a process. Positive experiences are powerful, but there has to be consistency and trust built over time to have lasting growth and healing.

Even having these occasional and increasingly frequent delightful experiences with one another, I see my kids protecting themselves from each other and not wanting to risk vulnerability. Markedly, after having hurt the other, they consistently display discomfort and resistance around showing care or taking responsibility for the impact of their actions, neither being willing to be the first to extend towards the other after a conflict. I witness them assessing the other for reliability and consistency, bringing up laundry lists of the reasons why they cannot trust the other based on the consistency of the other's trust-corroding habits. "She's just going to lie about it again." "He's just going to be too rough with me again." A positive experience doesn't erase all the hurt caused, all the moments of broken trust and betrayals. I see their motivation for investing time and energy wavering when connection has been so painful; it seems easier to just avoid or get space from the other.

They, like all of us, are looking for what happened (often a violation of consent) to be acknowledged, for the impact of what happened to be recognized and to know that the other cares about them and desires repair with them. They want to know that the other is going to do what they can to not do that same hurtful thing again; not only give lip service to not doing it again, but actually do something different next time, even if it is not perfect.

The language of consent and accountability is totally foreign for most of us and a ground-shakingly revolutionary cultural paradigm shift for all of us growing up in this punishment-fixated, consumerism- and capitalism-driven, misogynist, patriarchal, white supremacy-oriented, dominator culture. The paradigm we have been given and the culture that has permeated our inner and outer worlds tell us that to get what we want, we need to manipulate, coerce, control, or overpower; that there are only winners and losers; that one person's needs must be met at the expense of another's; that someone causing harm is proof they are bad and wrong; and accordingly, admitting that someone's actions have caused harm is admitting that that person is bad and wrong.

This potent and gripping right/wrong good/bad thinking profoundly influences how we view the world and the conflicts we navigate. In my experience, it has definitely proven to be one of the most challenging obstacles in doing accountability work, be it in the community, my personal relationships, or with myself. Time and again the effectiveness of accountability processes are impaired by the tendency to

be fixated on interpreting calls to accountability as punishment, and feedback about harm as a call out to being bad and wrong. We seem to have such a hard time feeling motivated to change or take responsibility when we are—or interpret that we are—up against judgment and punishment. In accountability work, it cannot be emphasized or repeated enough that the process is not a punishment and that no one involved is wrong or bad. If it's not voluntary, it likely will not be effective.

Learning to repattern our lives to orient towards consent and responsible repair is to go against all we have ingested about how to orient to the world. Much of the work of learning these new cultural ways of being is questioning and unlearning the dominator culture paradigm. How do we do that?! It is a huge leap of faith that another way is possible. It takes serious education and concerted effort to shed light on the taken-for-granted culture that we so often, especially those of us in privileged and advantaged positions, struggle to see and change. Lack of education and of motivation to engage in education are foundational gaps that impede the progress of this new culture. The majority of us do not at all understand what consent or accountability are. This unknown, and imagining of what they might entail, is obviously frightening and treated as a high risk by many. From inside dominator culture, consent culture and systems of accountability seem to appear akin to annihilation.

Like my kids experiencing the beauty of being heard by and listening to each other in the "Red, Yellow, Green" game, we all need positive experiences with embodied knowing of what consent and accountability can feel like; of another way being possible; that they can feel good and gratifying. We also need to be reassured that the inevitable discomfort we feel when exercising these new skills is evidence of the growing pains of trying something that we have been taught to be terrified of—to be vulnerably authentic, to show care for another, to not know what to do or already have the right answer, to trust that everyone's needs can be considered and creatively responded to without anyone's needs being disregarded. The discomfort that comes with practicing these skills is not to be avoided but rather is a sign of progress to be embraced, encouraged, and celebrated.

From my own experience of trying to integrate habits of consent and accountability into my body, family, and life patterns, I know how hard it is to change, and how change doesn't usually happen overnight or in a linear fashion. It is a dance with regressions and slip-ups amongst the progress and healing transformations. Old habits and patterns are hard to break. We need to be reminded that of course it is hard, and of course it takes time and practice, and of course we are going to fumble and mess up time and again along the way. After all, we are unmaking and remaking culture.

Someone stopped me the other morning to tell me how moved she was to have just seen my son and daughter round the corner on their way to school, arm in arm and deeply engaged in a radiantly joyful connection. This kind of nourishing exchange is becoming more and more common between those two and I am so happy for them. These days, I often hear the village kids navigating their own conflicts with such skill and with such wise insight that it blows me away. They are truly integrating these concepts of consent and repair, and I see them already turning around to have so much to teach us adults about how to do it better.

I am so grateful to the other members of this village who have their eyes and hearts on this cultural shift, who are living the struggle to do their best, to not be afraid to make mistakes and make amends; and who, through their modeling, are reinforcing the message of extending deep humanizing care towards one another. May this message and practice and way of living together keep growing and flourishing. May we keep expanding our capacity to meet each other in our reds, yellows, greens, and blues with curiosity, responsiveness, and radical humanity.

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*Julia Taylor writes: "I am an artist, dancer, mother, and community leader, living with my family for the last six-plus years fully engaged in Earthaven Ecovillage. Dedicated to cultivating a vibrant culture of liberation and social justice, I am a creative force and advocate for art, pleasure, and authenticity, as well as for the development of community education and systems of accountability. Increasingly, over the last several years, I have been studying and delving deeply into inquiries around the intersections of mediation, nonviolent communication, power and identity, consent, and accountability; asking how these orientations towards conflict do and don't integrate with or complement one another, and, depending on how they are used, can support healing or cause additional harm."*

# Building Consent Culture in New Culture East Community

*By Indigo Dawn*

I am no stranger to boundary crossings[1]. As a kid, I learned to comply with whatever my father wanted, to earn safety and love (a "fawn" trauma response). And that fawn response[2] has shown up over and over during my 29 years of life, when people have crossed my boundaries. Here's an example from several years ago *(Content Warning: unwanted sexual touch involving genitals—article resumes after "End of Story"):*

*Some details of this story have been changed to protect individuals' privacy; pseudonyms are marked with an asterisk (*) the first time they are used.*

It was day three of a 10-day retreat, focused on intimacy, social change, and personal growth. We were cuddling on cushions in the open sexuality and sensuality space. My eyes flowed languidly around the space, as my cuddle partner, Mike*, and I spoke calmly about something or other. He asked if I'd like a back massage, and I lit up immediately: "Yes! I LOVE massage." I had shared my boundaries earlier—"No lips, breasts, genitals, or nipples. Butt is okay."—so I didn't feel a need to set further context. I flipped onto my belly with my head turned sideways and my arms at my sides.

"How's coconut oil?" Mike called from the supplies table.

"It's great," I called back, my voice muffled by the cushion smooshed into my cheek.

After a moment, he knelt beside me and began to massage my shoulders. I let out a sigh of pleasure as his fingers sank into my yielding flesh: "Mmmm."

He used his palms and fingers to knead and press as he massaged his way down to my butt. After massaging my butt for a bit, he asked "Can I lay on you?"

A moment passed as I transitioned from my "ooey-gooey-massage-receiver" space to a space of feeling AND speaking. Then I chirped, "Sure."

Mike lowered himself face down on top of me. After resting there for a moment, he began to slide his bare chest against my bare back. "Weird way to massage..." a voice in my head remarked quietly, "But it seems okay…"

At that point, I noticed his erection—moving in smooth, circular motions across my butt and thighs. Internally, I froze. Disassociated. I lay still as he "massaged" me with his penis. I don't remember how or why he stopped, but at some point afterwards I was sitting up, with a distant look in my eyes. My friend Sarah was sitting a couple feet away, with her eyebrows furrowed and her lips slightly pursed. She sounded concerned as she asked, "Are you okay?"

I nodded and responded with a flat, "Yes." But I wasn't.

Mike had crossed my boundary, and I was in a freeze/fawn trauma response.

Deep in compliance mode, I accompanied Mike back to his tent and we sleep-cuddled overnight. It wasn't until I returned to my campsite the next morning that I realized what had happened, when the feelings came rushing in.

I told Mike what had happened for me, Mike apologized, and I got up in our community sharing circle to share my story with the whole camp...but the feelings remained. Eventually, I swallowed and compartmentalized them like so many times before. The impact of yet another boundary-crossing incident, stored in my cells and my psyche.

*End of Story*

Experiences like this, although painful, have given me the ability to deeply understand what it's like to experience trauma, to live with trauma's daily aftereffects, and to walk the long, winding path towards healing.

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Experiences like this, although painful, have gifted me with a superpower that I value immensely: the ability to deeply understand what it's like to experience trauma, to live with trauma's daily aftereffects, and to walk the long, winding path towards healing.

With this superpower in my arsenal, I follow my calling to create a world that works for all beings—including humans of every shape, color, ability, gender, neurology, sexuality, age, and background. I steward trainings, processes, and communities that are as life-affirming and trauma-informed as possible, alongside my beloved co-creator, Sarah Taub.

Over the course of our friendship, Sarah and I have designed and implemented consent processes[3] for over 40 workshops and 3-to-10-day retreats together, with anywhere from 10 to 1500 participants. These events are designed to weave a sense of rich connection and supportive community, in the moment and between repeat attendees. Most of these events are linked with the Center for a New Culture (CFNC), which has the mission to "Provide practical tools for a joyous transformation to a loving, life-affirming society." These events are our experimental playground and laboratory—the place where we translate our ideas into practices and work to build a "new culture" that minimizes trauma, harm, or disconnect; and maximizes growth, responsibility, and compassion. A key piece of this culture is the effective prevention of—and response to—boundary-crossing incidents. We work to prevent boundary crossings with ongoing, hands-on consent training for the whole community, and we respond to these incidents with the aid of our vigilant, accessible team of responders trained in emotional first-aid and accountability processes.

To sow the seeds of consent culture, we start each multi-day event with a hands-on workshop like "Boundaries: Finding the Sweet Spot" or "Consent Tools for Joyful Connections." In this workshop, we frame boundaries not as barriers, but as bridges for connection; as sign-posts that guide us towards the "sweet spot" of connection, where whatever is happening is deeply satisfying and desired by ev-

1. Boundary crossings, a.k.a boundary-crossing incidents, are interactions between two or more people, in which one person has the experience that their boundaries were crossed. This can range in severity, depending on the amount and the clarity of verbal and nonverbal communication; the awareness and intent of the person who crossed the boundary; and how each person feels during and after the incident.

2. Fawn is one of the four main responses to trauma (Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fawn). When a person is in a fawn response, they submit or comply to the desires, needs, or expectations of another person, to avoid conflict. This usually includes self-sacrifice and devaluation of one's own thoughts and feelings. A habitual fawn response is often the result of an abusive or neglectful childhood, during which fawning was the child's attempt to avoid violence, contempt, or abandonment from their caregiver(s).

3. These consent processes consist of structures, teams, and procedures to prevent and address boundary-crossing incidents.

Photos courtesy of Indigo Dawn


eryone involved. We lead exercises for participants to cultivate awareness of their feelings and desires, to practice sharing what they feel and want openly with others, and to build a joyous, compassionate consent culture that treats "no" as a gift, and bodily autonomy as a basic right.

Early in each event, Sarah and I also introduce the event's Consent Team, a group we handpick for their skills in empathic listening, conflict resolution, and decisive action. We train each Consent Team to identify and respond to a trauma response, as well as how to swiftly and effectively address boundary-crossing incidents using the frameworks and procedures we outline below. During the event orientation, we encourage people to approach a member of the Consent Team if they've had their boundaries crossed; if they've crossed someone else's boundaries; or if they need consent-related guidance. We ask people to report early and often if they witness or experience something with which they feel uncomfortable; when people report even the little stuff, it helps us address smaller problems before they become big. We also assure people that our default response is not punitive; the Consent Team aims to provide education, support, or reconciliation first, and only impose consequences as necessary. We do this to increase the likelihood that someone will report if their boundary is crossed by someone they care about, with minimal fear of retaliation from the team.

If someone tells the Consent Team about a boundary-crossing incident, we follow a general procedure[4] that draws on the ideas and expertise of the entire New Culture East program team (Sarah Taub, Debby Sugarman, Dawson Driver, Michael Rios, and myself). This process has four main goals: to help the impacted person find safety, integration, and empowerment; to impose limits or consequences on the boundary crosser that prevent future harm; to support the boundary crosser to learn, change, and grow (if possible); and to guide an accountability and healing process (if appropriate).

Here's an outline of the process our Consent Teams use to respond to a boundary-crossing incident. First, we give the incident reporter emotional first-aid and support as needed. If the reporter is in a relatively stable or resourced place, we reflect back and empathize with the reporter to help them feel understood. If the reporter is in a state of overwhelm (i.e. a trauma response), we use grounding and settling practices to guide the reporter towards responsive, regulated presence. Then we collect information about the incident, including the "Who, What, When, and Where," and whether we can use the person's name when following up on the incident. If the reporter is the one whose boundaries were crossed (the "impacted person"), we ask them what type of response they want from the Consent Team; if the reporter is not the impacted person, then we find the impacted person, give them support as appropriate, and ask about their needs and wishes. Next, we decide what actions to take, based on the answer to two main questions: 1. "Is the impacted person in a zone of Comfort, Stretch, or Overwhelm?" and 2. "Is the boundary crosser Unaware, Miseducated, Entitled, or Manipulative?" The New Culture East program team developed these categories for impacted people and boundary crossers, along with strategies for responding to them, which I detail below.

The "Comfort" zone is a state where the impacted person feels safe and centered in relation to what happened—where they can brainstorm, problem-solve, and move towards effective action. Someone in their Comfort zone may or may not need help from the Consent Team; if they do, they often simply request that we act as a sounding board for their ideas and a coach to help them implement their plan.

In the "Stretch" zone, the impacted person is experiencing some stress or challenge, but is still able to consider complex options and make lucid choices about the situation. If the impacted person is interested in personal growth, this can present a wonderful learning opportunity. Most of the time when an impacted person is in their Stretch zone around a boundary crossing, they can gain new skills and stretch into new ways of being, especially with support from a seasoned guide. This support can look like a facilitated conversation between the impacted person and boundary crosser; a guided roleplay and other skill-building activities; a Consent Team member addressing the boundary crosser on behalf of the impacted person; or whatever else they need to move towards integration and harmony.

An impacted person is in the "Overwhelm" zone if they cannot think clearly about the incident or are in a persistent trauma response. In this case, our Consent Team members take action to help the person feel safe and regulated, stabilize the situation, and prevent further injury. Actions we've taken include assigning a buddy to accompany the impacted person in group spaces, calling a full Consent Team meeting to assess and respond to the incident, and placing restrictions on the boundary crosser to avoid further harm.

4. "Assessing and Responding to Consent Incidents–Some Considerations and Rubrics" by Sarah Taub, 2019; unpublished internal document.

Once we discern whether the impacted person is in Comfort, Stretch, or Overwhelm and respond accordingly, we turn our focus to the boundary crosser. The members of the Consent Team observe and analyze the boundary crosser's behavior, to discern which of these four categories they best fall into: 1: "Unaware," 2: "Miseducated," 3: "Entitled," or 4: "Manipulative." (Of course, some people may have elements of more than one category.)

An "Unaware" boundary crosser has good intentions and was not aware that they were crossing a boundary at the time of the incident. This can include humans with neurological or cultural differences, or simply any well-intentioned person who didn't have the skills or experience needed for the situation they were in. I myself have fallen into this category various times! A typical Unaware boundary crosser is shocked to hear that they crossed a boundary, and then eager to apologize, learn, and make amends. This type generally responds well to clear information about what happened, why what they did was a boundary crossing, and what they could do differently in the future. If the person is neurodivergent or from a different culture, we might explicitly teach them what verbal and non-verbal signals indicate a "Yes," "Maybe," or "No," and good ways to respond in each case (for example, responding to a "No," with "Thank you for your clarity," and treating a "Maybe" like a "No"). Sometimes this type will seek out the impacted person to try to remedy the situation immediately, so we tell them to await instructions from the Consent Team before acting, and assure them that we are actively working to resolve the situation. That way, any reconciliation process can align with the impacted person's boundaries and desires.

A "Miseducated" boundary crosser has internalized harmful ideas and strategies for getting their needs met, but is not deeply attached to those strategies. For example, they might believe that "Women say no when they mean yes," and thus habitually push past a "No" towards what they want. When a typical Miseducated boundary crosser learns that they crossed a boundary, they won't show immediate remorse; instead, they often defend themselves by stating their harmful beliefs as evidence that they did nothing wrong. Once they grasp the negative impact their behavior had, this type will usually show empathy for the impacted person, and be willing or eager to learn more prosocial ways of being. One way we motivate this type to change their behavior is by explaining that they cannot actually meet their intimacy needs using their old strategies (for instance, if they push someone's "No," that person will probably feel hurt and eventually push them away). If the impacted person is in a stable place and open to interacting directly with a Miseducated boundary crosser, we generally seek to mediate a conversation between the two of them. During this conversation, we coach the boundary crosser to hold space and reflect back the impacted person's words, thoughts, and emotions—this has the dual benefits of helping the impacted person feel understood and giving the boundary crosser clarity about the impact of their actions. From here, it is often possible that the boundary crosser will take responsibility, apologize, and commit to changing their future behavior—though they may need additional guidance as new circumstances arise.

A typical "Entitled" boundary crosser has deeply entrenched harmful beliefs and behaviors and is myopically self-serving. When this type is informed that they crossed a boundary, they are not likely to empathize with the impacted person, express authentic remorse, or take full responsibility for their actions. Instead, they might blame the impacted person ("She was asking for it."); paint the impacted person as dishonest or unreasonable ("They wanted it and are just trying to ruin my reputation."); or challenge the legitimacy of consent culture ("This is just part of the dance. If everybody asked before touching anywhere, there'd be no dance!"). In most cases, it's a challenge to convince an Entitled boundary crosser to take steps to change their behavior. One way to catalyze behavioral change is to invoke a consequence that jeopardizes something they truly value (e.g., suspending them from the event or banning them from the community). Even if an Entitled boundary crosser initially agrees to cooperate with the Consent Team's requests, we still monitor their behavior and proceed with caution; some Entitled boundary crossers have a pattern of recidivism or superficial compliance, and it's important to discern whether the likelihood they will change is high enough, in proportion to the amount of harm they might cause and the quantity of training they will require in the process. If an impacted person is in Stretch and an Entitled boundary crosser is unrepentant, we don't pursue direct interaction between them (i.e. a mediated conversation), because it is highly likely this will bring further harm.

The "Manipulative" boundary crosser is the most dangerous of all the types, and can be extremely difficult to identify in some cases. This type intentionally schemes and deceives others, in order to satisfy their needs or whims. They will often conceal their true motives and masquerade as one of the other types as a way to mislead the Consent Team. Additionally, we have found that any feedback or education we give to this type

can easily backfire by teaching them better ways to fool the Consent Team and "game the system." It is rarely possible to catalyze necessary behavioral change in this type, and when it is possible, the change process is usually long, arduous, and complicated. Our Consent Teams typically don't have the resources to take on this process, nor are we willing to risk the magnitude of harm that could occur if we fail. So, once we identify a Manipulative boundary crosser, our practice is to isolate and remove them from the event as soon as possible. If the person seems authentically interested in learning and growth, we advise them to seek one-on-one help from an experienced therapist or coach.

At a core level, our Consent Team decides how to handle each unique boundary-crossing incident by considering the magnitude of harm that has occurred or is likely to occur, the potential for healing and education, and the amount of resources that the Consent Team would need to devote to keep one or both parties in community. Our categories for impacted people and boundary crossers give us shared language and concepts to help facilitate these complex decisions. We prioritize the impacted person's desires throughout the process in order to prevent further harm and subvert the historical patterns of traumatization, silencing, and victim-blaming that impacted persons have experienced for centuries. And we seek personal growth, reconciliation, and healing for all when the situation is ripe for it.

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During a multi-day retreat of about 80 people, our Consent Team dealt with the following situation *(Content Warning: unwanted touch on erogenous zones—article resumes after "End of Story"):*

*Some details of this story have been changed to protect individuals' privacy; pseudonyms are marked with an asterisk (*) the first time they are used.*

It was a warm night, and the energy felt electric. I was among a group of campers who had gathered in the small dome—the "Sensual Space," New Culture East's name for the open sexuality space at our retreats. The Sensual Space coordinators were "on-duty" for the evening's Sensual Space program, in addition to the facilitator's watchful eye, but I was still vigilant; what we had planned felt edgy. Half the group was to don blindfolds and lay down on one side of the dome, while the other half was to give them touch on any body parts they left unclothed—including genitals and nipples. I had never experienced an exercise that included anonymous sexual connection, but I was curious. And the facilitator and Sensual Space coordinators had held space for this type of thing before.

I was in the first group of receivers, and I was able to deeply relax into receiving what felt like safe, nurturing touch. Near the end of that second round, I was giving kitzy[5] (light touch) to a community member's butt when I noticed that two people were using their mouths to give touch. The facilitator hadn't explicitly addressed giving touch with different body parts in his instructions, so I examined more closely. Each of those two givers were men, and they were each giving touch to people with whom they had some pre-existing connection. One receiver, José*, was beaming and clearly enjoying himself, while the other receiver, Alex*, had an ambiguous expression on their face. I decided to complete the exercise, and then asked the on-duty Consent Team members to check-in with José and Alex. José reported that the mouth touch felt consensual and pleasurable. And for Alex, the mouth touch on their inner thigh had crossed a boundary, so they felt distressed and dissociated.

Meg*—an on-duty Consent Team member, and also one of the Sensual Space coordinators—followed up with Alex after the workshop. Alex was in Overwhelm, so Meg held space while Alex verbally ventilated[6] and shook. Once Alex seemed to have relaxed into their Stretch zone, Meg asked Alex what type of response they wanted or needed. Alex said they felt unsure about exact next steps, but felt fine to be around Zeke*—the person who had crossed their boundary—in public spaces, if he didn't interact with Alex directly. Alex also gave Meg permission to recount Alex's experience to the Consent Team, and to use Alex's name while addressing Zeke about the incident. Finally, Alex left for bed with their travel companion. Meg came to tell me that Alex was still feeling emotions, but was in their Stretch zone and thought sleep was their best option. On my way to bed, my partner Dawson and I noticed Alex's close friend, Neela*, pacing back and forth with her fists clenched, nose wrinkled, and eyebrows deeply furrowed. We sat and talked with Neela for a long while to help her process the boundary crossing. Then we went to bed.

The next morning, Neela threatened to call the police if Zeke remained at camp. Meg and I called a full Consent Team meeting. Zeke had been part of the New Culture East community for over five years, and had been involved in several boundary missteps before the Consent Team existed. He had also done some things earlier in the camp that made two Consent Team members question his grasp of consent culture. From what we knew of him, we thought it highly unlikely that he was a type 1: Unaware, or type 4: Manipulative boundary crosser, and predicted that he was somewhere in the realm of a type 2: Miseducated, or a type 3: Entitled boundary crosser. Considering these factors, we decided to impose protective boundaries and consequences on Zeke: for the remainder of camp, he would need to avoid the Sensual Space and verbally ask before touching anyone. Plus, if we received another report of a boundary-crossing incident, he would need to leave camp.

Our next step was to meet with Zeke. In the meantime, since emotions were high, Sarah agreed to talk with Neela; Meg volunteered to check in with Alex; and Michael took on the task of mobilizing a "Security team" to monitor Neela and Zeke, and to intervene if the situation escalated. And escalate it did.

When Zeke arrived at the afternoon workshop, Neela confronted Zeke and began yelling and pushing him, so the Security team stepped in to separate them. Zeke was visibly shaken.

Later that day, I met with Zeke, alongside one of the other Consent Team members. Zeke had already heard about Alex's experience—word had traveled. We asked Zeke how he was doing, held space for his emotions, and then carefully explained how his behavior had crossed a boundary. He cried. He told us that he was deeply sad that he ruptured connection with Alex, and that he was afraid of Neela. He asked if we thought he should leave camp. We told him no—that we didn't think he needed to leave camp, we would do what we could to prevent future violence, and we were working with Neela

to help her process the incident in nonviolent ways. He thanked us, and cried again. We said we thought it would be best for the community, and his own safety, if he avoided the Sensual Space for the remainder of camp. He agreed wholeheartedly. We told him to ask for explicit permission before touching anyone, including people he had a pre-existing relationship with, and that if we received word that he'd crossed another boundary, we would ask him to leave camp. He said he understood.

Meg met with Alex over dinner. Alex had spent considerable time feeling their emotions, getting support from other community members, and thinking about the incident—they now felt greater clarity about what they wanted. They expressed a desire to talk with Zeke and seek reconciliation, but they weren't sure how to go about it. Meg offered to mediate a conversation between Alex and Zeke, focused primarily on Alex's experience and needs, and Alex accepted the offer.

After that point, the situation continued to settle. Neela left camp. Meg mediated a conversation between Zeke and Alex, in which Alex directly shared their painful experiences, Zeke practiced reflective listening, and then Zeke shared his remorse and desire to repair the connection. After the conversation, Alex reported feeling safe and heard.

Today, Alex, Zeke, and Neela are still part of the community. Neela understands that her explosive response was fueled by her own experiences with sexual assault, and she accepts the possibility that Zeke wasn't malicious. Alex has attended community events since then, as have Neela and Zeke. And Alex recently let us know that they look back on the incident as an overall healing and growthful experience.

*End of Story*

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The consent programs that Sarah and I steward are far from perfect. With each new incident, we stretch deeper into discernment, compassion, and courage—and we collect real-world data to refine our frameworks and processes. After four years of this work, my heart still swells when I think of the lives we've touched, the trauma we've prevented, and the transformation we've catalyzed. I believe, in my heart and my belly, that we are doing sacred work. Beautiful, messy, gut-punching, heart-expanding work. The work of creating a life-affirming, body-honoring, intimacy-building consent culture. In community.

*Indigo Dawn (they/them/elle) is a transformational coach and touch therapist who LOVES to catalyze life-changing experiences for others (see mxindigodawn.square.site and facebook.com/Mx.IndigoDawn). They live in residential community with eight other queer folx and they co-lead the regional New Culture East community in the US (facebook.com/groups/NewCultureEast). They are also the Program Director for Center for a New Culture (cfnc.us); the Founder and Co-Director of the Consent Program for Interfusion Festival (interfusionfestival.com); and have organized hundreds of catalytic workshops with anywhere from 10-1500 attendees.*

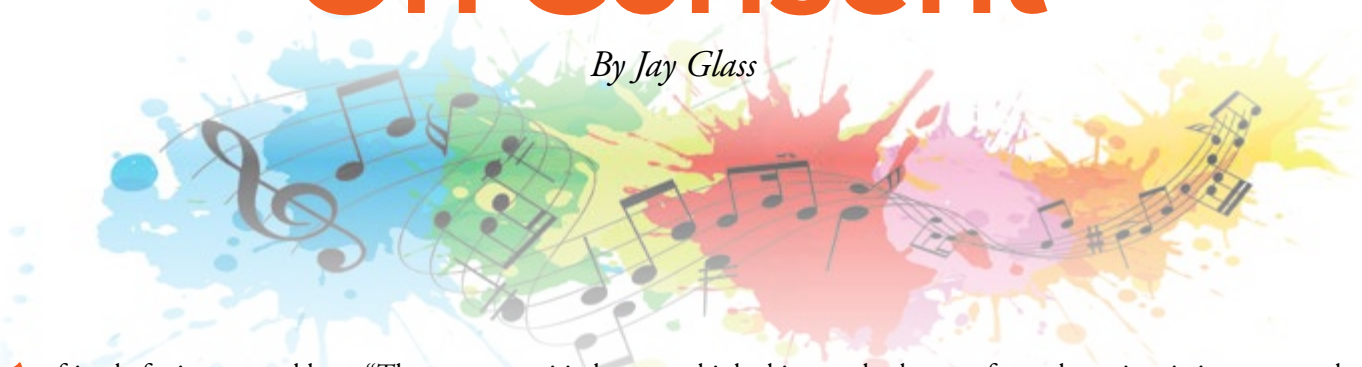
*As a conference speaker and facilitator, Indigo seeds skills that yield a more joyful and abundant life—including emotional dexterity, responsive boundaries, and intimate communication. As a personal coach, they support discouraged social changemakers to find joyous inspiration and practical tools for a more humane, abundant, sustainable world.*

5. Kitzy is feather-light, dynamic touch. This word comes from the Yiddish word קיצלען (kitzlen) and the German word kitzeln, which both mean "tickle."

6. Verbal ventilation is when a person speaks from their feelings in a way that helps them metabolize emotional pain.

# On Consent

*By Jay Glass*



A friend of mine once told me, "There are two critical steps in learning to appreciate music. Step A: learning that just because something is popular does not mean it is good, and Step B: learning that just because something is popular does not mean it is bad."

For me, this was pretty useful. It gave me a framework for understanding why so much of what I heard on the radio I didn't like, and at the same time meant it was ok to still love Beethoven and the Beatles, and years later I could go back and gain an appreciation for stuff I didn't really "get" when it came out.

But it's hard to prove. What does "good" mean with music? Is good about original chord progressions or witty lyrics or having enough cowbell? Does the musician's moral stance matter, or what they are trying to communicate? You can measure sales and profits, but measuring good/bad, well, you can get some approximations, but certainty is hard.

Consent is about as difficult as this.

To start with, we don't have cultural agreement even within American culture that consent is in fact important. In 2016 we elected a president who bragged about violating it, and we nearly re-elected him again last year. Go to many other countries, and while it's something of an apples to oranges comparison, I think it's fair to say that overall consent in the sense of sexual bodily autonomy is in most places valued less than here. For the majority of people in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, spousal rape is not a criminal offense.

In 2015 a widely read blog post became the basis of a British Public Service Announcement which compares consent and making tea for people. It's titled: "Consent: Not Actually That Complicated." It was something of a landmark; it takes a stand and says some things that are to me and many of my friends basic, obvious truths. Around that time, people heavily pushed the notion of "enthusiastic consent," that people shouldn't be doing things, particularly sex things, that everyone involved wasn't very much on board with, in a "YES!" kind of way.

In a world where possibly over half the living humans don't think a wife has a legal right to prevent her husband from having sex with her when she has a headache, standing up and saying, "Yo, what are you doing, this isn't that hard" seems like a sound moral stance to me. But I might be in the minority here, and if you feel that way too, you might also be in the minority.

Several articles were published in response pointing out that consent could at times in fact be extremely complicated. I don't think this exactly detracts from the point, it just means that if you already believe that consent is a thing and that it is important, you are already past the basics and that message isn't intended for you.

You can focus on either convincing other people of the basics, or on the hard stuff. Because the hard stuff is out there, and it's personally where I spend a disproportionate amount of my time. This is both because my life is in certain ways unusual, and because I can deal with 100 simple consent cases in a fraction of a second each, but one complicated situation can take hours or more.

Does someone have to be 100 percent on-board with zero reservations before they are consenting? If they are 10 percent tired or grumpy does that mean they don't get to have sex even though they 90 percent want to?

Decades ago, when I was dating someone with multiple personalities, basically it was like having sex with a committee. A different person could grab the mic at any time; some of them wanted to have sex, others never did.

It was fraught and complex, but could have been much worse. Two friends of mine dated briefly around when I met them and I didn't know them well, and they didn't know each other particularly well. One of them was dissociative but not co-conscious, meaning that not all of her personalities really quite understood that she was dissociative. One time they were having sex and she switched personalities to someone who didn't know who this guy was or why they were fucking. Imagine if this wasn't in the context of a weeks-long relationship; if this woman picks up someone in a bar and takes them home and initiates sex with them, it's possible that at some point she's going to switch and be like, "Who are you? What are you doing?"

So, yeah, I believe in consent. Preferably enthusiastic consent. And in many cases, consent is as easy as asking if someone would like some tea. But be aware: An enormous number of people don't believe consent is important, and there are plenty of cases where it can't even be meaningfully defined in a way you could get even 20 people to agree about, let alone a whole town or culture. Just because the problem is hard doesn't mean you get to opt out, but also it doesn't mean you have to be perfect; you probably won't be. But please do try.

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# The Sweet Spot of Consent

*By Amanda Rain*

Sex is messy. This is true in a literal, physical sense—sweat, fluids, sounds, movement mishaps—and in a nonphysical sense—desire, boundaries, consent, social conditioning, who else is around while having sex. On that last point, I'm referring to who or whose voice(s) is in your head and thoughts, while that may also be literal. Consent is an attempt to sort through the messiness, to increase the odds that you're having a shared experience rather than two completely different views of the same experience.

Consent is a conversation, ongoing, moment by moment, ever shifting and emerging. The only way to truly stay within a consensual field of experience is to stay fully present with the other person(s)[1] and the experience as it evolves. Some things we will have clarity on—our desires, boundaries, and curiosities we already know—while some, perhaps many, of our desires, boundaries, and curiosities will be a journey of discovery and exploration into unknown realms where we learn as we go.

Thus, one of the keys to consent is slowing down. We cannot stay in the deep listening—meaning full-bodied listening and sensing—if we're acting from assumptions or expectations based on social conditioning or norms,[2] hopes or desires, and perhaps more importantly, we will miss when the energy and experience shifts and changes.

Some, perhaps many, of our desires, boundaries, and curiosities will be a journey of discovery and exploration into unknown realms.

## The Risk and Cost of Open Communication About Sex

I don't want to paint an idyllic picture that once we speak openly about sex and engage consent practices, all the social risks melt away and sexual violence becomes a thing of the past. I cannot gloss over the fact that every time a man looks at me with desire and I don't reciprocate, I go into evaluating my behavior in order to manage their expectations, which in truth, I have no real control over. It's a kind of harm reduction that I autonomically do.

In her book, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, Katherine Angel writes that "once a woman is thought to say yes to something, she can say no to nothing." Indeed, I spoke openly to my mix-gendered teammates at a college retreat with many different schools about wanting to have sex with a particular man at the retreat. We tended to be rather open with each other, but a man outside our team was present. Later that night, when I was completely inebriated after the farewell party at the end of the retreat, I went back to my hotel room to find him in it. The short version of the story is that I was able to talk my way out of the encounter. However, it was an emotionally scarring event. The risk, cost, and punishment of speaking desire that Angel writes about in her book is vivid for me.

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Angel additionally pushes back on the idea that we (with the burden largely placed on women) must be clear about what we want before we engage sexually. She writes, "Desire is uncertain and unfolding, and this is unsettling... We must

Kym Mackinnon

not insist on a sexual desire that is fixed and known in advance, in order to be safe."

I once had a lover ask me what I wanted, and I fumbled with my words as I tried to find a response. I realized that I'd never been asked what I wanted to experience with sexual pleasure before. I felt both surprise and uncertainty. This lover gave me such a gift because he told me that he wasn't going to do anything until I asked for something. I learned a lot about myself from that experience.

I'm so used to giving myself toward the pleasure of men. The concept of it being *all* about my pleasure and desire was so new that I didn't know what to ask for. In part, it's difficult for me to know what I want until I'm experiencing it. I also had a rush of thoughts that created conflict within me. Even as far as I have stepped outside mainstream culture, there were still so many voices inside my head influencing what I felt I could and shouldn't ask for.

What's more is there are times when I can't say what feels good and what doesn't until it's happening. I may want to have sex with someone or explore new sexual positions or techniques, but then once we're in the act, I realize that what is happening doesn't feel good. Desire alone doesn't equate to good sex. Saying yes, even emphatically, doesn't mean it will be pleasurable or turn out well.

## Uncertainty Within Consent

I have witnessed people, particularly male-identified, unsure how to engage others, particularly female-identified, in the new age of consent. The social norms are changing, which has created more uncertainty. It's as though some men are asking anxiously, "Just tell me what to do, how to be. Tell me the new rules." After operating for generations based on expectations from storylines perpetuated in our culture and media, they are asking what the new expectations are, the new prescription.

But that misses the point. As we wrestle with what works and doesn't in our sexuality and how we relate to each other, we are well served to let go of our expectations, goals, agendas—to stay in the uncertainty, in the unknown as it becomes known. We humans are variable, we change. This is why it is juicy to be and stay curious.

The immutable fact is that we are each different, carrying varied and dynamic experiences from our past that play into the present moment. Our bodies are different and changing—the exact same touch can create a vastly different experience from one day to the next even with the exact same people.

As soon as we assume we know another's experience, thoughts, and/or feelings, we start operating from those assumptions and expectations. We lose presence and start to act and behave autonomically, going through the motions. Rather, consent happens when we allow what's true in the moment to arise, listen to what's being communicated, feel and sense where the energy is flowing and where it's not, and check-in to stay in communication, giving space for discovery while honoring what emerges in the moment, whether it's more desire and arousal or a boundary, even an abrupt stop.

## The Sweet Spot of Consent

I'm a fan of the sweet spot, the place where everything aligns, flows, and connects. There's not too much or too little, everything in good measure. Consent is juiciest when there's open, honest, transparent communication, and responsiveness to the needs, desires, and boundaries of each person. The sweet spot is not a fixed point, but one that must be discovered and rediscovered to taste of its nectar.

I like to view consent through a manual transmission analogy. The clutch is consent. Before you start the car, you need to engage the clutch, or it won't start. Similarly, before you start a sexual encounter, you need to engage consent. Is there attraction? Is desire and/or arousal present, or a curiosity and willingness to explore? Is there mutual shared interest in exploring sexual intimacy together? Once the car is started, it's generally good practice to let the car warm up some before you start driving.

To start driving, you begin in first gear with the clutch (consent) engaged followed by a gradual building of speed.

Within sexuality, it's a gradual building of energy. The speed at which the energy builds may vary, just as the intensity of attractions vary, moods vary, our sexual energy varies, but the act of building energy at a pace that aligns with the experience cannot be skipped if you're going to drive the car and move into higher gears. To shift gears, you must engage the clutch. To escalate to a new level of sexual engagement, engage consent.

Where we commonly go wrong is when we try to start driving a sexual experience from third gear, and too often, it's one person pushing for third gear while the other is still questioning if they want to get in the car. Attempting to start driving a car from third gear inevitably causes the car to stall, sometimes quite dramatically. Repeated attempts at driving from third gear will ruin the clutch and possibly the transmission. To go somewhere, you must engage the clutch and start in first gear.[3]

It's the same with sexual encounters. The lower gears can be equated to foreplay, which includes conversation, flirtation, and just being present with each other. The lower gears also include gentle touch, caressing skin, kissing, licking, and all the things that are generally slower, sensuous, and savory. The higher gears are the more energetic moments that can include faster motions, heavy breathing, maybe some biting, penetration, orgasms. There is no shortcut or way around the building of energy from the lower gears into higher ones, and the clutch, mutual consent, is required to move between them.

Paying attention to how you downshift an experience also helps. Did everyone engaged in the encounter orgasm, experience pleasure, and/or do they feel satiated? Continuing to stay present with each other as the energy dissipates, slows down, and lingers is a way to honor and respect the other person(s) we are with.

I had a wonderful experience with a man whom I'll call "he" and "him." We were at a festival, and I had seen him around before. I felt a spark of attraction for him. I tend to move fast and jump without looking, what I have since learned is part of trauma patterns. I was intentionally focused on not pushing the pace of our engagement, to stay in a place of curiosity and exploration, taking it moment by moment in a deep listening to what was unfolding between us, what was mutual and shared.

It began with a dance. There was nothing overtly sexual about the dance. It was lively, fun, and fluid. He was an amazing dancer. As the weekend progressed, we shared conversation, walks, and snuggles. We talked openly about many things personal and intimate, as well as general and intellectual. He read me poetry that he had written. We talked about past relationships and connections with other people. We talked about the potential of being intimate with each other. There was never a hint of pressure toward a desired outcome from either of us. It was an open inquiry, a curious exploration.

I desired him. I cannot misrepresent that. However, I didn't allow that to shape my behavior other than being open to what evolved between us, the ongoing conversation and inquiry, the deep listening to what was emerging between us. We spent four days in this lovely exploration and as the event was winding down, we chose to have sex. We stayed in communication as the energy shifted, and it was beautiful. He expressed care, we tended to each other's pleasure, and created space for the unknown becoming known as we deepened into the experience.

Afterwards, I was reflecting on our time together and realized that the whole weekend was its own form of foreplay, of gradually building energy, and shifting gears when desire was clear for both of us. When we did end up having sex, it was connected, consensual, and honoring. What allowed it to be so was an intentional effort from both of us to go slow, at a pace that dictated its own timing, which gave space for each of us to be in our own individual inquiries as we explored the connection between us.

## When the Answer is No

When I teach consent workshops, one of the first things I do is teach people the Art of No, which is a more eloquent way of saying rejection. Even the word, rejection, has

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a stabbing feel to it. We generally don't say or hear "No" well in our culture. Many would rather avoid someone than say no to them. Some take it as an affront on their ego, their personhood, their identity.

I like to see "No" as making space for our "Yes." No means "next"[4] and is no big deal. No directs us to focus our attention and energy elsewhere. The more we normalize no, the easier (and hopefully more graceful) it will become to both hear and speak.

I'll share one of my favorite rejection stories, one where I was rejected. I once gave myself a challenge—to ask someone for a kiss. It was my attempt of getting out of my comfort zone, something I do regularly when I catch myself getting too cozy in inertia. I found myself conversing with a man I found attractive, so I asked him if he'd like to kiss me. His response was the best no I've both heard and received to date. It was beautiful.

When I asked, he replied, "Let me think for a moment." He placed his hand on his stomach, closed his eyes, and went silent for a minute (a length of time that can feel like forever when anticipating an answer to a vulnerable question). I watched him in silence and waited. I was both nervous about his response and appreciating his process.

When he opened his eyes again, he looked at me with direct eye contact and said, "No." There was a brief pause, and he continued, "and let me tell you why. First, I'd like to thank you for asking the question because it allowed me to consider what it is I'm wanting from a connection. What became clear for me is that I'd like something deeper. You're beautiful, and I'm honored you want to kiss me. Thank you."

The thing about rejection is that it stings. Even with one as kind and thoughtful as this one, there was a piercing sting I felt in my belly. Fortunately, it quickly faded, which it will always do if you feel it and let it go, refocusing your attention on what follows next.[5]

After integrating his no, I replied, "Thank you for your clarity and honesty."

We continued talking for a bit and then went our separate ways.[6] I went on to ask again and received both a yes and a kiss.

## Helpful Reminders for Successful Consent

• Let go of any goals, expectations, or agendas—be fully present with what's happening in each moment, breath by breath, both within you and the other person(s).

• Slow down—take the time and space you need to find your truth in the moment—feel free to pause, ask to slow down, calm your mind and find your center, releasing any pressure you may feel either externally or internally, then see what feels true for you.

• If you're clear on your desire and boundaries, communicate it.[7] If you're unclear, speak that.

• Be in your truth and allow others to be in theirs.[8]

As we continue to reshape, redefine, reimagine, and redesign the ways that we engage each other in our intimacy and sexuality, it is my hope and desire that we find ways to honor each other through practices of consent. May we allow the truth of the moment to be expressed, whatever that truth may be (with the exclusion of violence). May we lean into the risky, edgy moments of uncertainty as the unknown becomes known. May we learn to embrace and be in service to mutual pleasure and fulfillment, especially for those who are traditionally underserved.[9] May we find the beauty within us and see it reflected outside us. You, I, and everyone deserve pleasure, respect, honor, and dignity. It's not too much to ask.

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*Amanda Rain founded Speaking the Unspeakable®to inspire the courage to meet our challenges and empower our lives through effective communication. A mix of passion, education, training, and real-world experience has given Amanda a unique perspective on how communication can be utilized to support our personal growth and evolution. She engages the unspeakable within and between us with heartfelt empathy and fierce compassion. Amanda teaches workshops on Speaking the Unspeakable and Building a Culture of Consent. Her voice offers hope for the spirit and medicine for the soul. You can reach her at connect@speakrain.com and speakrain.com.*

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1. While I identify as cis-hetero, there are many choices people can make in how they engage their sexuality and relationships, and love is love, however and for whomever it shows up. I have attempted to be inclusive in my language to honor all choices and identities as equally valid.

2. Relating to norms and cultures of a specific community, as well as the broader culture that often has more influence in alternative culture than we like.

3. It is possible to start driving from second gear, usually in older cars with well-worn clutches and transmissions. I equate this to long-term relationships where people are intimately familiar with each other. Still, while possible, it's harder on the car and creates more wear.

4. I picked up this phrase when working as a campaign petitioner. In this context, "no means next" could mean next person or if in a long-term relationship, no could mean next potential solution, activity, endeavor, way to connect, etc. The only real limits are those of our imaginations.

5. We often try to skip feeling uncomfortable emotions, though this never works. Each of these steps–feeling it, letting it go, and refocusing attention–are equally important to processing rejection, or any feelings of discomfort. None can be skipped to be effective.

6. In reflection, this is also an example of trying to start driving in third gear (maybe second, though without any familiarity) instead of first.

7. I once shared with a man who was flirting with me that I would enjoy making out with him, but I wasn't interested in having sex. I said this before we even touched. We were merely sharing flirtations. I did this because I needed to. It was what helped me overcome the deep-seeded belief that kissing leads to sex, or as Katherine Angel puts it, once I say yes to something, I can say no to nothing.

8. Not everyone will do this. Coercion, abuse of power, sexual violence, and rape aren't the result of miscommunication or a lack of clarity.

9. By underserved, I am first speaking of women of color, especially black and indigenous, people who are trans and the full spectrum of 2SLGBTQIA+, black, indigenous, and Latino men, women who are cis and white, and all who have been demonized in or for their sexuality.

# Learning Consent through Therapeutic Touch

*By Ishka Shir*

Photos courtesy of Ishka Shir

I am a therapeutic cuddler. I have one-on-one platonic touch sessions with clients and host touch-based group events. As such, my work revolves around consent. In order to provide a safe(r) space for my clients and participants I am constantly giving and requesting verbal consent. I teach consent. I encourage people to ask for what they want. I encourage people to have boundaries and to voice them.

I teach people not to take a "no" personally. It only hurts myself to assume that someone's "no" is because I am not good enough versus the fact that they have personal reasons that they do not need to tell me as to why they don't want a hug or to receive a foot massage or perhaps to interact with me at all. It seems so much healthier to ask for what I want and to hear no (and respect it) than to cross someone's physical boundaries.

Unfortunately, many people are scared to say no to others because they don't want to hurt someone else's feelings or receive negative judgment themselves. I've heard many stories and experiences where people felt physically uncomfortable or did not want to share physical affection, but saying "no" was more uncomfortable than enduring unwanted touches. In my opinion, in order to have a healthier society of adults, we need to teach our children (and ourselves) how to say "no" and make sure that everyone truly understands what "no" means.

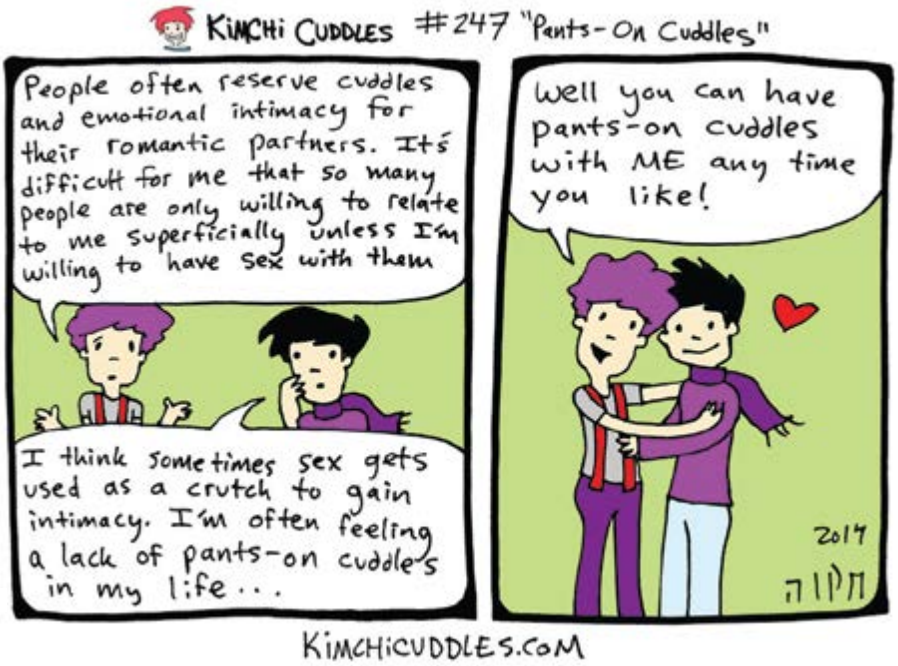
We exist in a culture that does not teach us how to ask for and receive safe physical touch. It's no wonder that so many humans have experienced and/or caused harm related to physical intimacy. Studies have shown that people need human touch in order to grow into healthy adults and thrive emotionally and physically. Being that we were never taught how to acquire this basic need, we are left with a community of severely under-touched people, people who have been harmed and traumatized by receiving unwanted touch, people who do not know how to offer or receive touch that is not sexualized, and people who cause harm because it is the only way they know how to get their physical needs met.

This does not have to be our reality. With education, we can shift our culture, community, and experience around touch.

In 2017, #MeToo hit the scene in an empowering way. Tarana Burke's phrase, which aims to empower women who have experienced sexual violence, informing them that they are not alone, went viral. Women began sharing their personal stories—many of these had been held in silence for years and decades. As women's stories were shared, their voices became stronger and more powerful.

People who had caused harm (both intentionally and unintentionally) were being named and called out. As a result, I witnessed men around me becoming even more scared to seek out physical touch with women. I would often hear sentiments such as "I don't want to get called out for accidentally touching someone inappropriately," or "How am I supposed to know if she wants it or is going to tell everyone later that I sexually assaulted her?" WOW! It shocked me to realize that what came up for so many people was the fear of accountability versus the potential for causing harm.

I believe that with clear verbal communication where people are able to ask for what they want and where personal boundaries are voiced and respected, the majority of situations in which people experience abuse, violation, and/or assault would no longer exist. Why aren't we taught basic consent skills in the western education system? Sadly when it comes to communicating about physical touch, we are adults with hushed voices teaching children to continue the same behaviors. On the surface, asking for what we want and waiting for permission does not seem overly complicated or scary. Unfortunately when unclear communica-




Tikva Wolf, TikvaWolf.com

tion is what we have learned and practiced our entire lives, opening up and being vulnerable can be terrifying!

In the first few minutes of a one-on-one session with a new client, I inform them that this is their time to receive what they want. I encourage them to ask me for the touch they desire—with the reminder that everything will stay platonic and that I maintain the ability to say no to their request. It is common for a new client to be shy, hesitant, and say they don't know what they want. I offer suggestions and encourage them to tell me if any of my offers sound like something they want to try. Often by the middle of the session a client is asking for specific types of touch without prompts. They feel safe. They feel confident. They feel seen. My goal for my clients is that they will be able to take these experiences from our sessions into the rest of their lives.

At group cuddle events I facilitate consent practice games. They are basic, but encourage people to begin using their voices. One of the games I offer involves passing out prompt-cards to the participants. Participants mingle around the room and read a prompt to another participant. Their card may say something such as "May I hold your hand?," "Would you like me to rub your shoulders?," "I'd like to put my head in your lap...would that be OK with you?" Then the receiving participant reads from one of their response cards which might say "yes," "no thank you," "thanks for asking but I'm not interested," "not right now, but please ask me again later." This is verbal consent at its core.

I feel such joy being able to witness participants who arrive cautious and hesitant warm up to the group. I love hearing people ask for what they want. I really love hearing participants confidently say "no" to each other. I've received an abundance of feedback from participants about how safe they feel at events I facilitate because they can trust people to be honest and authentic. One of my hopes is that the people I impact will continue to educate the people they interact with and slowly we will see consent culture become second nature in our communities.

Cultural patterns don't generally change quickly. I believe that rewiring humans to have the confidence to ask for what they want and to share authentically takes a lot of education, experience, vulnerability, and practice. I am inspired that consent is beginning to be taught in some sex-ed classes in schools and that some media outlets are now portraying verbal consent on the big screen (e.g., *Frozen* and *Moxie*). With greater communication skills (specifically around touch but also in general) we have the potential to shift our culture from what is currently often harmful and toxic into a safer, happier, more fulfilled existence.

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*Ishka has lived in intentional and unintentional communities since she was a teenager and currently lives in Asheville, North Carolina. She has been offering healing touch professionally for most of her adult life and now focuses on therapeutic cuddling and cultural shift through consent education. She is a firm believer that touch is a vital part of the human experience—one that can catalyze growth, healing, and transformation. She is passionate about educating people about consent and encouraging people to ask for what they want and to be accountable for things they have done in the past. To see more about her offerings go to her webpage, HoldmeAVL.com.*

# Party of the First Part

*By Stephen Wing*

So which one is the hugger
and which is the huggee?
I mean if two consenting adults
apply a mutually inclusive measure
of muscular encirclement,
freely attaching themselves at the heart
in a fully symbiotic, non-virtual embrace,
exchanging equivalent amounts
of sensual tranquility and consensual bliss
for a precisely equal number of minutes
that seem to stretch out luxuriously
heartbeat by heartbeat
into a lifelong friendship
the very first time we meet, well,
how can we even tell ourselves apart?
And for that briefest of eternities,
is it actually possible to distinguish
the ones doing the hugging
from the hug itself?

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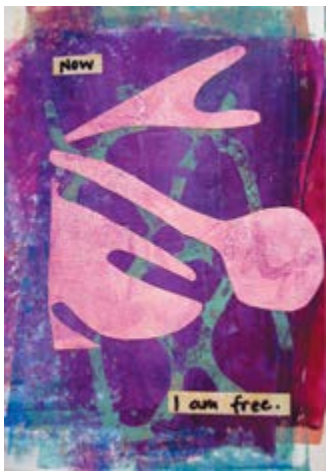
*Stephen Wing lives in Atlanta, where he hosts an "Earth Poetry" workshop each season to explore the city's many urban greenspaces. He is the author of three books of poems and serves on the boards of the Lake Claire Community Land Trust and Nuclear Watch South. Visit him at www.StephenWing.com.*




# Smashing Chains

*By Johanna Jackson*

First, you said
*I would never do that.*
And I trusted it, still not knowing
the stench of your lying breath.

Then you said
*But I need you.*
And the lies choked me,
a vise grip on my throat.

Gifts flowed from your hand.
At dinner, on a Saturday night,
butternut squash lasagna, piping hot.
Rupturing, scalding,
bursting in my mouth.

On a Monday afternoon, in the café,
a blue-green fountain pen in a velvet box.
I open it. A monster springs out!
Snarling, unseen,
it clutches my skin with dirty claws.

Under your hand, I complete tasks.
Things I would rather forget.
But it was you who barricaded the building,
you who lit a match.
Fire sprawls, and I am inside—tumbling.

I dart inside the arson cage,
face bloody,
bumping into trick walls,
moving like a panicky deer.
My soul shatters.

Later, laughter disappears.
With vacant eyes,
I search inside gutters and scraps
for what was once mine.

Laboring for freedom
is tricky work
when the soul is under capture.

In dreams, I want to scream
but the scream comes silent.
Seven years pass, and then three more.
Time plods on, breaking the rope of
your lies.

For all the gifts that flowed
with chains attached,
now I smash those chains!
I reclaim these fingernails
and breath, beautiful breath, as my own.
I rise up, strong and holy.
Open hearted. Square shouldered.

After running every night
from my own dreams
and my own pain,
now I have something to say
with clarity:

I know what you did.
The lies are clear.
I know you're in pain.
But now? Now I'm free.

***Author's Note:***

Abusive relationships are things that contain and condense us. They sever us from where we truly belong, which is inside our own skin. They alter our sense of community and connection. When I came out from abuse, I realized that I no longer felt like I was part of the human family.

We are **all** part of the human family; I know this on the surface. But we might live through experiences that make us feel as if our membership has been revoked.

I want us to remember that all abuse happens inside of a community. It might be a neighborhood, a family, a classroom; it might be a dormitory or religious group. But even if the abuse is unseen, it still happens inside of a larger context. When we look at that context, we have an opportunity to heal.

It took me several years to write this poem. Early drafts of it ended in anger. But reclaiming the truth is part of my healing. Even if deep violations in consent leave deep marks, I believe that in time, with love, those marks can be transformed. Thank you for being part of the transformation.

*Johanna Jackson is a writer, artist, Quaker, and resident of Central Pennsylvania. She is cofounder of the Listening Project. Listening to people's stories is part of her healing. Learn more at forwardinfaithfulness.org.*

# Responding to an Incident of Domestic Violence in Community

*By Anonymous*

For over 20 years I have been working on a personal project of healing from the violence in my childhood. As an adult, my automatic response to violence was to freeze and hope that nobody noticed me. I was not satisfied with that. I set a goal to be able to stay present, able to think and act, when violence occurred in my life or in my surroundings.

I had a chance to test the effects of my healing work earlier this spring. I was standing in the long driveway with three of my rural community-mates, a man and three other women. One of the women was the man's partner. They began an argument that we attempted to mediate. He became very angry and left the group. The three women stayed with me and we began talking about what had happened. We asked the female partner if this was a pattern of behavior (it was).

After several minutes, the man returned at a run. He rushed right into the circle and past the place where he had been standing before. I saw him coming. As soon as he took one step into the middle of the circle, I stepped between him and his partner. I didn't even think about it, I just acted. He kept rushing toward her, and I placed my hands on his shoulders and stepped into him, saying, "Step back." He shouted at his partner over my shoulder as I kept stepping him backward and repeating, "Step back."

Later, one of the women told me I was speaking very gently and I had a smile on my face as I did this. The man's shouting included threats of physical violence and blaming the woman for his difficulties. I was not triggered at all. I felt connected to the man and the women, and I could remember that we are all good. I felt strong, and clear that I was setting a reasonable boundary in a reasonable way.

At the same time, another woman was talking to him, attempting to redirect his attention away from his partner. Two of us (both female survivors of violence) were able to stay present and directly responsive to the man.

The female partner ran away, and one of the women followed to give her attention. This woman was frozen in fear in the presence of the man, so she chose a way to help that created distance between them. Then the man shouted obscenities in his partner's direction and ran off. My husband heard the shouting, came out of our house, and followed him to give him attention. The remaining woman and myself gave each other attention.

Since then, this group (and some invited others from the community leadership) has met several times to help the man think about accountability in his relationship with his partner. The female partner has decided that she no longer wants to live with this man, and we are supporting them to sleep in separate houses in the community until they figure out how to divide their belongings. We made an agreement that they are never to be alone with each other, and that any of us is available to be a third person present if they need to directly interact with each other. The man is interested in making changes in his life, and has been willing to listen to each of us tell the story of how we experienced what happened, and how it impacted us and our children, some of whom were present for the incident.

Previous incidents of this sort with other individuals have resulted in eviction from the community, but in those instances the man was not willing to engage in community process or follow restrictions imposed by the community. Also, the stability of the relationships in our community has increased over the years. We now have a solid core of strong women and men who are engaged in healing the effects of sexism, racism, anti-Jewish oppression, and other identity-based forms of violence.

We were able to hold strong expectations about acceptable and unacceptable behavior in our community. We also were able to remember that all people are good, and that none of us would hurt another unless we were first hurt. The questions was not, "Is this a bad man who needs to leave?" The question was, "Is this a man who is able to make the necessary changes to keep living here? Is he able to reach out for additional resources from outside the community, and make lasting changes with our support? Is our support of him sustainable; can we do it without falling into patterns of sexism and co-dependency?"

I am proud of myself, and of the work I have done. I am a survivor of incest, rape, and domestic violence, both in childhood and in early adulthood. Being able to act in this situation has been very empowering for me. It also helps me remember why I live in community. Part of my reason for living this way is to avoid the kind of isolation that accompanies male-on-female intimate violence. I feel safer knowing there are multiple people aware of the intimate daily movements of my family. I know I can run to the nearest community member in moments of conflict and ask that we not be left alone with our struggles. I can trust that if we cross a certain line, our community mates will tell us, "That is abusive and we don't condone abuse here."

# Gluten-Free Consent

*By Stephan Nashoba*

I recently compared consent culture at Twin Oaks to my gluten-free diet. Let me explain…

Before I transitioned to a mostly paleo-ish diet, I was eating the general Standard American Diet (SAD) and didn't really think that anything was super wrong because I was used to feeling a bit uncomfortable after eating. I thought that this discomfort was normal.

Once I eliminated most processed foods, gluten, grains, beans, and dairy, I felt so much better. I feel somewhat foolish that didn't even realize that feeling better was a possibility until now. Avoiding these foods has also made me more sensitive over time to when I do consume them, either intentionally or accidentally.

This is similar to my experience with daily minor consent violations that are common in the mainstream and happen much less here at Twin Oaks. In the mainstream, the slight discomfort felt when someone pats you on the back without asking or touches your arm to get your attention when you're not that emotionally close to them is normalized (and exacerbated by sexism). You don't realize until it's gone that you don't have to feel that way because people aren't supposed to do that.

At Twin Oaks, I thought it was a little weird at first that folks would ask if they could hug me or give me a high five. But then, I began to appreciate that I didn't have to have as many awkward interactions where folks (mainly cis men) randomly touch me unnecessarily while talking to me, expecting that I was "supposed" to be ok with it. I can breathe a lot easier knowing most people here will maintain good boundaries around casual touch most of the time.

Knowing that this feeling of ease exists makes me more sensitive to the times when it does still happen. I get more upset now than I used to about people just going in for the hug or high five without asking me. I will likely vote to reject the residency application of a visitor who casually touches folks without asking, and I get more annoyed in the mainstream when I notice that this behavior continues everyday outside of our little bubble.

I'd like more people (especially women, trans folks, and non-binary people) to be able to move freely in the world without feeling mildly uncomfortable all the time (often due to the carelessness and/or entitlement of cis men). So let's all try to be better at this since I think we can all benefit from transitioning away from the Standard American Diet of sexism and consent violations and into a world of trust and ease.

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*Stephan Nashoba has lived at Twin Oaks Community (twinoaks.org) in Louisa, Virginia for about seven years. In addition to being on the Health Team, co also manages Equipment Maintenance, Taxes, Archives, and Twin Oaks Queer Gathering. Co also enjoys blacksmithing, rock climbing, DJing dance parties, being read to, and consuming a variety of potato products. This article is adapted from the author's blog post of July 19, 2018 (see runninginzk.wordpress.com/2018/07/19/gluten-free-consent). See also Stephan's previous article in* Communities, *"We Still Have Toilet Paper: COVID-19 Pandemic Response at Twin Oaks Community" (issue #189, Winter 2020).*

# Getting Clear through Consent

*By Chant Thomas*

Photos courtesy of Chant Thomas

In 1991, Antioch College in Ohio instituted the country's most specific policy of consent regarding sexual relations among students. Remembering this event may date you as a boomer, but Antioch students of those times were required to ask for consent before raising the romantic heat level another notch. I remember laughing with gusto at a comedy group spoofing this policy in a comic club: "My dear, may I hold your hand?" "Of course, sweetie, now may I give you a kiss?" "Mmmmm, that was luscious! How about a little feely to follow?" And so on.

Consent lies at the core of every agreement governing intentional communities. If you give your consent to abide by the agreements of your community, then the community consents to give you access to benefits provided by the community.

Looking over various definitions of consent, I gravitate to this one: a voluntary yielding of compliance. To obtain the experiences of intentional community that we desire, we voluntarily yield and temper our individual wills to comply with community policies and procedures. We can do pretty much what we want on our own piece of Land. However, to live successfully in an intentional community, we will likely forego some of those personal prerogatives to comply with community agreements. Likewise, we may also have to incorporate community lifeways that we would not have embraced doing our own thing on our own private Land.

Besides consent on a community scale, consent plays a crucial role in relations among individual community members. Communitarians learn that clearly communicated personal boundaries facilitate illuminating a rich area for interaction inside the boundaries. Consent holds the key for when an individual is willing to stretch their boundaries for whatever reason.

In the early to mid-1970s, my first spouse and I traveled extensively visiting intentional communities from Virginia to Oregon, Idaho to Arizona. At each community I'd ask about their community culture, especially related to consent, agreements, and boundaries. Within a few years, I accumulated a wealth of information about what worked and what didn't in these intentional communities.

While most people link boundaries and consent to intimate relationships, these functions apply to most every interaction in community. A few examples of consent violations from a community I cofounded and where I lived for over 40 years:

- feeding a meat lunch to vegetarian children without asking parents for consent to pierce their childrens' dietary boundary.
- deciding to purchase an expensive item (camera, computer, bicycle) when behind in financial community commitments and not requesting consent to continue beyond the boundary of minimum financial participation.
- letting your friends visit with their dogs, despite a no-dogs community agreement. You chose to avoid asking for consent and did not want to ask your friends to leave their canine companions at home.
- deciding to grow "just a few" surreptitious cannabis plants because you knew the community would not consent to this activity far outside an important community boundary.

I'm sure your imagination or experiences can identify other community boundaries that require consent to make an exception.

My spouse and I eventually gathered interested folks for potluck meetings to assemble a group of communitarians ready to come together and purchase Land to build our intentional community. We circled after dinner and passed a feather to hold while each of us self-introduced to all present. Then we





would pull out a jar with questions and topics, gathered from our tour of communities, written on pieces of paper. One at a time we drew pieces of paper, read the question or topic, then passed the feather for each person to comment on the topic. This process proved addicting and we'd often stay late into the night, pulling pieces of paper to initiate lively discussion about the topics and questions at hand.

After a few months of such meetings, stretching from autumn 1975 into the winter months, 14 of us jelled around our vision of community and a remote old homestead we'd decided to purchase. Altogether, three intentional communities grew out of our meetings, each one with different visions, agreements, boundaries, and reliance on consent.

During the entire process, the best advice came from an attorney friend who specializes in nonprofits and intentional community. His advice began with encouragement for a prospective intentional community group to have several vibrant brainstorming sessions to explore all the wonderful things they could embrace as community on their Land. Keep track of how much time the group spends on this creative task, envisioning the gardens, children, buildings, events, cohesion, security, and community accomplishments. Then, he advised us to spend an equal amount of time and enthusiasm brainstorming everything that could possibly go wrong, and then to craft an agreement to address each potential pitfall.

It's important to utilize whatever decision-making process your group has chosen (consensus, majority, sociocracy, etc.) to plow through this advice about pitfalls. How would your community deal with pitfalls such as these examples that my community experienced: massive flood, nearby forest fires and evacuation advisory, messy divorce of member couple, child abuse, attempted suicide of member, government plans to clearcut the mountain looming over our place, people who ignore agreements, how to adapt to changes in individual members and how might such changes impact boundaries of acceptable behaviors.

In each example, we had to choose acceptable boundaries to describe the free space within each experience. We had to arrive at an agreement where all members accepted boundaries and consented to comply. We inevitably had to later decide when to consent to exceptions of an agreement. Given near constant changes of intentional communities, agreements will require a clear path to periodically update as the community and its members evolve and change, making determinations regarding when to ask for and when to grant consent.

Before computer technology shattered the tranquility of our remote community, we would say that it's best to write agreements in pencil, then understand how to reach consent for using the eraser on the other end.

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*Chant Thomas has lived within, or connected to, intentional community since 1968, and cofounded Trillium Farm Community in remote SW Oregon in 1976, where he lived for 42 years. Chant supported his environmental activist career by working in natural and field sciences, university teaching, and 20 years as a wilderness guide using pack llamas. He has written widely and published in several journals, from the* American Journal of Science *to* Siskiyou Journal*, and* Communities*, and in bioregional and travel anthologies. A publisher is presently reviewing his first book,* Stalking the Spotted Owl: Searching for Elusive Owls and Sasquatch in the Siskiyou Mountains. *Chant and his partner of 25 years, Susanna Bahaar, presently travel Baja in their vintage camper van for several months during winter. Stateside, they reside in a spiritual community deep in a wild canyon of the high Southwest desert the rest of the year.*

# Is Consent Decision-Making Hard?

*By Sharon Villines*

Why is decision-making in cohousing so hard? Is "consensus" the cause?

### 1. Decision-making is hard regardless of the decision-making method.

If a decision is easy, it has probably already been made. The formal decision is just a formal recognition.

### 2. Making decisions that affect others as individuals is hard.

Making decisions about planting or cutting down trees, for example, that are equally respectful to the light and shade of every unit is complex and there is no right answer. But if you make the decision autocratically or by majority vote, some people will either disengage or simmer forever.

### 3. Communications are hard.

People have different expectations even when using the same words. "Cost-effective" will be defined differently by the sustainability-focused and by the lowest-cost-focused. Is cost-effective a short- or long-term decision? Preferences on screen doors gathered in October may be forgotten in April when the options have changed. If another choice is made for everyone without further consultation, uninformed members may feel betrayed. A missing feature may be very important to some but not even noticed by others. It's hard to remember who knows what and easier to just get the job done—in the short term.


Brandon Lopez

### 4. Having patience is hard.

A decision that you see as clearcut, a no-brainer, is new to others and they need to sit with it. On any given day, some people will be too physically or mentally stressed to make another decision. And in the best of times, people focus at different speeds. It may seem efficient to limit discussion, but that may suppress the information necessary to making a good decision. Arbitrary limits on decision-making are counterproductive when the objective is a decision that everyone can respect and implement. Decisions take time, time to understand concerns, time to find the information to resolve objections, and time to resolve the conflicts that led to those objections in the first place.

## 5. Decisions that affect us physically and emotionally are hard.

In cohousing when our soul is invested in changing the world, decisions take on added meaning. Recycling isn't about recycling. Living closely together and sharing life events may affect us physically and emotionally at barely conscious levels. Sometimes our concerns, objections, or even our consents are difficult to explain because even we don't understand them.

## 6. Decisions that place limits on future options are hard.

Governance decisions confine future actions. Spending money means there is less to spend in an emergency. Decisions that allot physical space mean taking away from one thing or person and giving to another. If 10 households give up their parking spaces to build a secure bicycle parking shed, how will it affect them in three to five years if they have to sell their units? Predictions in real estate with a lot of experience are risky but with little or no previous experience they are frightening. Who wants to take risks that limit options for themselves or for others?

## 7. Decisions that honor or ignore our ethical beliefs are hard.

Is boycotting a store that mistreats workers an effective way to change the practice? Does everyone agree that the workers are being mistreated? Should the community allow violent video games in the common house? Are they "just games"? Is it more ethical to object and disturb the peace or to allow others to follow their own ethics for the sake of community harmony?

## 8. Decisions about spending large amounts of money are hard.

Going $500,000 into debt to install solar panels is a calculated risk. It seems promising that the solar will pay for itself—but will it? If it doesn't, can the community afford the extra costs just to be proud of being more green? The amounts of money required to maintain a 35-unit residential complex means consenting to amounts that we can't fathom. The optional decision to replace the roof with more expensive green tiles doubles the cost. But can you ever demonstrate your commitment to sustainability if you don't choose green upgrades?

## 9. Decisions that must weigh multiple socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural differences as well as age and gender are hard.

In cohousing we want both diversity and harmony. But diversity brings conflict. How far can we go in respecting diversity if it means costs for things valued by only a few—or even by just one? Is it more important that a childcare provider be hired for meetings so elders and those not practiced in listening over babies can hear? Does the community pay for this or the parents? If the Jewish members don't want to have meetings on Saturday and the Christian members on Sunday does that eliminate meetings or workdays on weekends? Avoiding discrimination requires a depth of awareness and consideration that few of us have lived with on a daily, moment-to-moment basis at home.

## 10. Decisions to change are hard.

Changing our own lives is hard. Changing the lives of dozens of people is harder. Allowing dozens of people to change our own lives is hard. In cohousing many decisions will be about living differently—not all will be welcome. Decisions about how children will be expected to behave in common areas affect everyone. Keeping your cats indoors because someone else thinks you should; cooking only vegetarian meals in the common house… These are not just rules. They change how we live.

• • •

Decisions are not likely to be made any easier with more or better processing, or training in consensus, limiting discussion to force a decision, or hiring a professional facilitator. An organized discussion might be less distressing than a disorganized discussion, but decisions are usually distressing for reasons having nothing to do with skill sets.

Group decisions become easier as community members build trust and understand what is important to others, but there are always new community members with new opinions, needs, customs, and expectations. And it is not unusual for newcomers to join a community with ideas of fixing it. Decisions that need the support of all members will always require more understanding from everyone.

Some decisions might be more appropriately made using a different decision-making method than consensus. Majority vote for choosing dates when most people can be in town for a celebration. Ranked-choice voting for choosing the strongest preference among six alternatives. But the ease of the decision will still be a matter of degree—from hard to less hard.

Leaving a minority, even a minority of one behind can fracture everyone's sense of community for a long time.

What makes decision-making easier is accepting that making decisions is hard. It isn't hard because we are inexperienced, afraid of conflict, have psychological problems, are too dominant or too passive, or are social failures. Decisions are easier when we expect them to be hard and allow the time required for everyone to accept the decision, even if they don't like it.

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*Sharon Villines is a founding member of Takoma Village Cohousing in Washington DC. She currently writes on governance issues in community development and is coauthor of* We the People: Consenting to a Deeper Democracy*, a handbook on understanding and implementing sociocratic principles and practices. She is also editor and publisher of AffordableCohousing.com, a website devoted to providing information and a discussion forum for those interested in forming low-cost cohousing communities.*

# How Conflict Can Lead to Consensus

*By Martie Weatherly*

Fifteen of us sat in a circle, trying to come to consensus on a thorny issue: should we pay to repair the sink hole that had suddenly appeared, half on our property, half on county land? Some said we should repair it and not jeopardize our relationship with the county as we developed our cohousing community. Others said, why should we pay for it when the hole is on county land? We agreed to sit there until we found a solution that worked for all of us.

It took two hours, sometimes with someone talking and sometimes in silence. One idea after another arose. Finally someone said, "Let's send a letter to the county asking for reimbursement. All they can do is say no." Heads nodded in agreement. We formed a task team with some from each opposing point of view. They presented their letter at the next meeting and we sent it off.

Result: we split the cost and repaired the sinkhole.

Lesson learned: it pays to stick to our commitment to consensus—the best decision for the whole community at that time. If we had used backup voting, we would have had a very dissatisfied minority.

Consensus is not easy; in fact it's very challenging.

When we were planning our development, we spent as much time developing our consensus process as our bricks and mortar. We brought in consultants, had retreats, read books, and wrote our Pathway to Consensus. We adopted it in 2001 and it has been our guide since, with minor revisions in 2017.

What has worked well with our Pathway?

- Ideas for plenary discussion come from a team which has considered the ramifications of the idea.
- The team first brings the idea to plenary for values clarification. What is important about this issue?
- Team crafts a proposal from that and brings it to plenary.
- It takes two meetings of discussion, allowing time for reflection and input from absentee members.
- If more than two members stand aside or block, we do not have consensus and we either discuss it more or refer it back to the team.
- Anyone who blocks has a responsibility to explain their point of view. Both the blocker and the community must listen with respect. The community can set aside the concern if they deem it to be personal and not based on the values of the community.

Over the last 20 years, we have had seven blocks and six were resolved by talking it out. The other was set aside as a personal value.

Don't shy away from conflict! The one value consensus requires is that everyone honors and respects views of all people even if they are very different. A collaborative community needs people who have different points of view and are willing to learn how to use disagreement to find common ground.

This is the challenge of consensus!

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*Martie Weatherly recently retired after 20 years as a hospital supervisor. She has been a personal and life coach for over 20 years, where her passions are health, well-being, vitality, and community. She is also a consultant on community decision making. She lives at Liberty Village Cohousing in Union Bridge, Maryland. See coachmartie.com.*

# Consent: One Journey of Understanding

*By Anonymous*

While reviewing and purging old electronic files recently, I came across a letter I wrote several years ago to members of my cohousing community's "center circle."

I had intended to deliver it to one of several self-governance groups within my intentional community's sociocratic circle system, but never sent it. The group process that triggered my effort had so altered my sense of optimism that my voice would ever be truly heard that I had no expectation I would receive a sincere response, much as that desire prompted its creation.

Among the several questions my letter posed, this one jumped out at me:

"How can we create a 'whole community' culture in which we trust that our voice and needs matter if our agreements are subject to arbitrary 'one time only' suspensions in non-transparent processes that harm as few as a single member?"

As "the single member" who considered myself harmed, I won't go into most of the painful details regarding what happened—they outline the actions of a small group of members who control decision-making, and indirectly reference the lack of understanding in—and valuing of—consent as a defining principle within all our community relationships.

I considered the actions of those in power to be a betrayal of the trust that accompanied our collective decision to use consensus-based self-governance when we founded our community over a decade ago. However, I knew also that those members who expressed upset at what happened did not have the skills or motivation necessary to help me should I request a review of this action, which was the purpose of my letter, and I had learned the futility of going it alone.

Since writing this letter I have delved deeply into confronting my own contribution to the damaged social fabric that loosely holds my condominium neighbors and me together. I kept on pushing my concerns even as more and more members either left or retreated into their own lives and passively engaged in what I call "going along to get along," because, I eventually came to realize, they didn't know what else to do. Initially, I thought they just didn't care. I was arrogant at times; at other times "clueless" would be a more apt description. Only within the last year and a half have all the once mysterious, disconnected bits and pieces of effort aligned to reveal the shape of substantial hidden agendas that promoted individual, not community interests; secrets that have created loyalty binds and driven factionalism; covert plans that required those people directing them behind the scenes to maintain control.

I suspect most people not in control roles experienced anxiety that they too would be targeted if they came to my defense or raised their own objections to abuses of power.

It is difficult to quantify the impacts on my community of the repeated refusal by those who were circle and HOA board of director members to address my concerns about real problems. I suspect most people not in control roles experienced anxiety that they too would be targeted if they came to my defense or raised their own objections to abuses of power that continually undermined commitment to our values. Many members also benefited from those abuses, which gave them influence and privilege that kept objections in check.

In addition, members in my community do not receive any education about consent and could not express objections that were linked to violations of it, as they did not recognize them. The overwhelmingly white, middle-class, and "left-middle" political characteristics of the kind of people who are able to pay more than $300 per square foot for our condos includes significant reluctance to "rock the boat" and a tendency towards what is termed "colonized consciousness"—a tacit acceptance of someone else's authority over their autonomy that precludes awareness of choice to do

otherwise. So many of my neighbors are content to let others be in charge.

The community I live in switched from using formal consensus to sociocracy quite some time ago because "consensus wasn't working." In our version of sociocracy, "affiliation"—the word used to define structural work relationships—is interpreted as "liking." Meeting evaluations focus on "getting along" and enjoying one another's company. Circles and working groups no longer create "aims" against which work contribution is evaluated; plans are shaped outside of open meetings and announced, as are election results. The achievement of objective measurable goals is never discussed, much less even described as necessary, although they are considered integral to sociocracy's overall effectiveness as a method of structuring work.

The letter I never sent asked that a "one time only" proposal introduced at the beginning of an election meeting be reviewed. Designed by group of facilitators that included a member who desired to be what we call a "leader," it permitted "whoever is elected" to the role to immediately dissolve the existing circle membership and pick new members. As those who conceived of this plan made sure their allies were present at the meeting and most of the people on the circle for which a new leader was sought at that time were not, the proposal was quickly "consented to" despite my well-articulated objections. I was on the circle...and then I wasn't once the new leader was elected.

This procedure privileged the newly elected person's voice over the voices of the existing circle members to define their inclusion. It violated our governance documents and elevated the influence of the facilitator to control the outcome of the proposal, which is generally considered an abuse of power. It operationalized and normalized bullying and targeting. As my peers on my circle would not remove me, for I had done nothing wrong, and they "liked me," our agreements were put aside to transfer power to someone else who wanted it, for "just this one time only."

A month later I wrote, but never sent, my letter requesting a review of this process. The paragraph that followed the one quoted above continued to unpack my concerns:

"I am requesting that the members of the Center Circle clarify what constitutes true 'consent' by determining whether or not a policy proposal that alters our election procedure introduced and passed in the same meeting despite unresolved conflicts between impacted stakeholders can ever be an ethical self-governance process consistent with our values if done so in circumstances that are not of an emergency nature."

I said nothing about the intimidation, deception, and peer pressure that radiated from this action, and many more, like the blaring wail of a siren warning of danger and proclaiming "Keep away!" The people who set up the action I contested were the same ones occupying the circle roles empowered to review it. And, in the end, I too just kept away.

Today our once-a-month community meetings are attended largely by those who hold circle roles, their partners, and new people—about 20 percent of our adult population. The buildings are well-kept, the land still a source of pleasure and pride, and our culture, in which circle members direct financial and social resources to themselves and their interests in a "top-down" power structure, is more "HOA" than "intentional community."

At the last monthly community meeting no one indicated a willingness to commit to facilitate on an ongoing basis.

Photos by Chris Roth

Concerns about general lack of interest in participating in these meeting have been noted recently in the minutes. The current facilitators' terms have expired and they no longer want to carry this responsibility. So, continuity of this core collective engagement—the whole community circle meeting—is not assured.

For me, consent—the ability to truly decide for oneself how to live one's life—is integral to my spirituality. So many of my core values—to be of service, to contribute to the common good and seek to avoid causing harm, to consider and create a meaningful life—are linked to my ability to consent to actions that impact me. In consent, my very essence is defined. That's what drew me to intentional community in the first place.

The conditions that foster consent are fragile and must be cultivated with care, like seedlings reaching for life within the soil's endless cycles of nutrient and waste exchange; growth, death, and renewal. In order to protect consent within community life, it must first be recognized as a necessary component of authenticity, cooperation, and care.

The more subtle, nuanced positions of power inherent in sociocracy's "checks and balances" processes have to be understood and enacted within the system they are a part of, but our procedures are designed to suppress feedback and empowerment and they do.

Any group that uses complex consensus-based systems to structure their self-governance needs to educate members as to what "every voice is heard" actually means. It doesn't mean speaking louder or longer, or to each and every person. It doesn't mean just listening: it means responding as if concerns matter by addressing them and keeping "feedback loops" of communication intact to integrate the concerns of those who are not actively included in decision-making.

What my experience has taught me is that if people wait until it is their voice that is not heard and they have stood by while other voices were systematically diminished and extinguished, the cumulative weight of collective passivity relentlessly presses indifference forward, whether they want it to, or not, in a downward spiral of numbing and withdrawal.

Healthy community culture requires training in how to speak up and how to listen, as many of us do not learn how to do this in the educational, employment, and social experiences that shape our development. It also requires a context that offers at least a minimal level of emotional safety to practice being "in community," which is a process of unfolding trust that can, if nurtured, strengthen as time goes by.

Theory predicts that a tipping point inevitably shifts towards feedback correction when imbalance arises in living systems. I'm not sure when that will happen in my community regarding the lack of consent, but I trust it will. I'm pretty old, so I may not be around when it does, but the land will endure, the desire to steward it will continue, and so will the desire within the human spirit to recognize what it means to have choice and exercise consent in order to have a meaningful life embedded in positive relationships, experiences, and values.

This recognition flourishes all around me—in the rising global protests about climate change, ecosystem degradation, in the emergence of the Black Lives Matter Movement, and the #MeToo movement, and in the promotion of university student guidelines on what sexual consent is—and is not.

These days I set my sights on communities of welcome and move towards them. I still speak up, but with more discernment as to whom, where, and how, and with greater compassion for those who cannot or do not. I have found peace in accepting the limits of a single voice's power, even as I listen to hear others speaking out about issues that matter to me and add my voice to theirs. I have learned that consent exists only when the option to refuse to consent is not linked to threat or harm that precludes real choice, and I cannot decide for others what that means. I'm still learning what it means to me.

# Consent-Based Decision Making at Songaia Cohousing

*By Brian Bansenauer and Libby Kelleher Carr*

*We did not put our ideas together. We put our purposes together, and we agreed. Then we decided.*

—Popol Vuh, foundational narrative of the K'iche' people (Guatemala)

Photos courtesy of Brian Bansenauer

Jean loved to sing. It's not hard at Songaia to find a space to start up a song, but Jean could cheerfully organize a crowd of hungry neighbors into four-part harmonies before a community meal. A last memory of her before she passed in 2016 was listening in rapt attention as she and her two grown children offered a beautiful early choral piece as a round into the late spring evening. When not singing or walking her dog, Jean wanted to connect. "Let's sit and talk," she'd say, and in the conversation she would work to cultivate heart connections and shared purpose.

Somewhat ironically, Jean's $100,000 bequest which she asked to be used "to improve Songaia" spurred two years of community discussions with lots of ideas, but little progress toward any specific decisions. We couldn't seem to align our ideas. However, as the pandemic hit, two projects emerged that provided the perfect context to dig deeper into our community consent process.

## Two Projects, One Pot

Some piecework had begun before the lockdown toward a new outdoor plaza between the common house and garden. Social distancing helped focus energy and vision toward this outdoor space. It also effectively shuttered the common house; this enlivened the discussion of a long-overdue remodel of the common house kitchen. Perhaps with some recognition of the limited funds, the two project proposals spilled out at about the same time, with initial cost estimates nearly double the bequest. And these were only two of many ideas that had been discussed regarding Jean's gift. Decisions, decisions.

## Passion Principle

One of the threads of collective decision making at Songaia is the "passion principle." Its most basic concept invites people to communicate a vision and look for resonance with others who might share a similar purpose. Often the purpose fits within one of the community's standing committees, but an ad-hoc group can form and plug into a formal community decision process. If the group's passion finds energy rising, they begin to clarify goals and take some initial steps toward them. At this point, it takes some effort to remember that passion is not the same thing as ownership. Being open to other people's input and feelings as they intersect or collide with an emerging idea is a first step toward community agreement. This can be quite challenging, both for those excited about a shared purpose and

for those outside the group experiencing the ideas as "running them over."

A framework from Otto Scharmer's work on generative listening provides a helpful model for working through this tension. He breaks down three progressively deepening layers of listening as *open mind:* listening with curiosity, *open heart:* listening with empathy, and *open will:* listening with creative expectation. As we glimpse what's emerging from our interaction, the tension begins to release into creativity. Our purposes align and then we decide.

An example of this deep listening process happened as the Plaza group explored ways to reduce the proposed draw from Jean's gift. Based on a member's experience raising money for a public park, the group put together a fundraising model including a catalog of items on the plaza available for "sponsor donations." Simplest were the engraved bricks, at $50 per brick. During the community decision process, several strong negative reactions from members at a roundtable surprised the committee. By listening with curiosity they began to understand the different ways people perceived the proposal, from "a tried-and-true fundraising technique" to "a barrier to community belonging." Listening with empathy helped gently connect the common human experiences underlying people's perspectives with the surfacing passions, fears, hopes, and dreams. Finally, listening with creative expectation opened space necessary to step out of these individual experiences and perceive a path that might put our purposes together.

Changing our thinking takes time and effort. While a palpable shift occurred at the roundtable, the listening process didn't happen all at once or in the same way for each person. Working with a small group provides the shared support and accountability needed to hold space for the ideas to fully emerge. The Plaza group, for example, worked together to clarify and articulate the shared ideas from the roundtable about the engraved bricks. From these conversations, two facets of the common purpose began to emerge: first, the engraved names represented a heart-link to Songaia, so they should be available without cost to anyone who felt that connection; and second, a letter to our extended community describing the vision for the plaza should both ask permission to include people's names AND invite people to donate money, skill, and/or time to the project. Not only did this clarify the purpose of the bricks, but shifted the outreach interaction from a transactional to a relational frame that better aligned with its purpose.

## Getting to Consent: the Decision Board

Over 25 years, trying to reach agreement on proposals during monthly community meetings became less and less workable as we shifted from "building a community" to "living together as community." We have sought out decision-making containers that invite everyone into thoughtful conversation while allowing for people's varied life commitments and interest levels. One common container Songaia uses regularly is the Decision Board (see sidebar). It's both a physical place on a Common House bulletin board and a process for discovering and documenting community consent.

The process works to center transparency, inclusion, and forward movement toward an emergent decision. A written proposal and tally sheet document the final decision. Multiple venues for discussion open the process for anyone who chooses to participate, while those with little or no interest can step back. Inspired by N Street Cohousing's decision process, we recently added step 6 as a way to push toward the goal of aligning purpose while addressing concerns.

## Addressing Concerns

Just after the kitchen proposal had begun its two-week decision window, the impact of the pandemic on the economy was

increasingly dire. This general anxiety coalesced into a member's specific concern, shared via email: "In short, we are living in a time of great uncertainty. We are planning a kitchen remodel that will consume the majority of our community reserves and Jean's gift. I propose not to go ahead with the [kitchen] remodel at this time. ... I am sorry to rain on the parade. I can not in good conscience support an expenditure that may in the long run turn out to be harmful to my beloved community."

The Kitchen group began conversation both with that member and with others, finding resonance with the concern in the community. Listening deeply, they also discovered that people inspired by the vision of the new kitchen had energy rising to help make it happen. While the initial proposal had focused on completing the remodel quickly, they refocused it on doing more of the work using community expertise. Several members stepped forward to lead different phases, removing the need for a general contractor and further reducing the cost. Though this stretched-out construction, the longer timeline actually aligned purposes by allowing us to assess and adjust for the pandemic's impacts as we went along. The person raising the concern stayed deeply involved, helped revise the proposal, and contributed immensely to the work.

## Typical Decision-Board Process

1. A committee or work group drafts a written proposal and shepherds it through the process.

2. A proposal sponsor presents an overview at a meeting and requests questions of clarity.

3. A decision tally sheet for member input (*Consent* or *Needs Dialogue*) is posted to the decision board and the proposal is also sent via email.

4. A two-week window opens for recording individual input via the tally sheet or by email. No input (leaving it blank) signifies consent.

5. Sponsors host two or three open discussions at different times to solicit questions, comments, feedback, and suggestions.

6. People marking *"Needs Dialogue"* are tasked with actively exploring issues and possible solutions with the sponsors to move the process forward.

7. Substantive revisions to a proposal require an updated written draft, a new two-week window, and a fresh tally sheet for recording.

–BB and LC


## How It Ends

While any decision process has its challenges, this one aligns with our broad community goals of engaging passionately, listening well, and looking for what wants to emerge. It encourages each person to bring their ideas, curiosity, and heart to the conversation while acknowledging differences in energy and interest. It provides a specific focus for engaging concerns, harnessing them as a catalyst to clarify common purpose.

As far as the two projects were concerned it was a smashing success. After several revised written proposals, the community reached clear agreement and a sense of shared purpose on both projects. Working together to enhance community space provided a welcome dose of connection and hope during the pandemic lockdown. Both projects were completed using less than half of Jean's gift and came out so much better for the time and effort we gave to the decision process.

One of the first community gatherings on the plaza was an open mic on the newly paved stage. Gathering outside in the large space allowed everyone to be together in person and see each other's faces for the first time after a long, hard winter. Neighbors shared stories, songs, silly sketches, and touching poetry. When the program wound down, instruments appeared for a spontaneous jam session. As the long spring evening stretched out the day, the shared music seemed to carry Jean's voice into the fading light: "Let's sing, talk, and make Songaia better, together."

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*Brian Bansenauer, a member of the Songaia Community since 1998, teaches at Cascadia College. He is writing a book on teaching and learning as a generative system using permaculture design principles.*

*From first discovering cohousing 30 years ago while traveling Sweden, Libby Kelleher Carr has had a circuitous path from political rabble rouser to independent life insurance agent, finally landing at Songaia in 2017. She is currently working on a children's picture book on how the reindeer fly.*

# Scaling Small-Group Consent with Sociocracy

*By Ted Rau*

## My community

There's a lot of talking about consent for our own personal space. But how does consent work as a collective? In groups, issues like the tyranny of the majority, or the tyranny of the minority, and all manner of interesting group power dynamics spring forth, and generally on top of the same power dynamics that hamper the practice of consensual engagement as an individual.

The community where I live with about 70 neighbors, Pioneer Valley Cohousing (Amherst, Massachusetts), has been practicing Dynamic Governance (a.k.a. sociocracy) for almost 10 years. In my view, consent is more than a decision-making method—it's what arises when a whole system is set up to maximize listening, voice, and empowerment. In this article, I want to show how small teams and consent can scale to larger groups.

## Consent in sociocracy

What brings us together as a collective is our shared purpose. That's why sociocracy defines consent in relationship to that shared purpose. Every small group has a purpose (aim)—a description of what we do. For example, "stewarding the land, with concerns for aesthetics, food production, and environmental quality," or "supporting the physical and emotional well-being of community members."

When there's a proposal and everyone in the circle sees the proposal as good enough to serve the aim, then we consent. If it's not good enough, then we object and say how we think the proposal harms the aim. An objection doesn't mean blocking—it means pointing out an area of improvement. What I love about objections is that they remind us of the shared aim. If someone objects, they do that *because* they want to further the shared aim, and objecting is necessary to improve the proposal so we achieve our aim better. In that way, the shared aim acts as a unifier; the circle will listen to an objection and integrate the wisdom it brings because all members care about achieving the aim. That way, we don't fall into factions but keep our eyes on the prize: staying united in our shared project.

If one circle member objects to a proposal, the decision cannot move forward. A circle member cannot stand aside or abstain in consent—every member of the circle is co-responsible for any decision they make together. We need full consent from all members to make a decision.

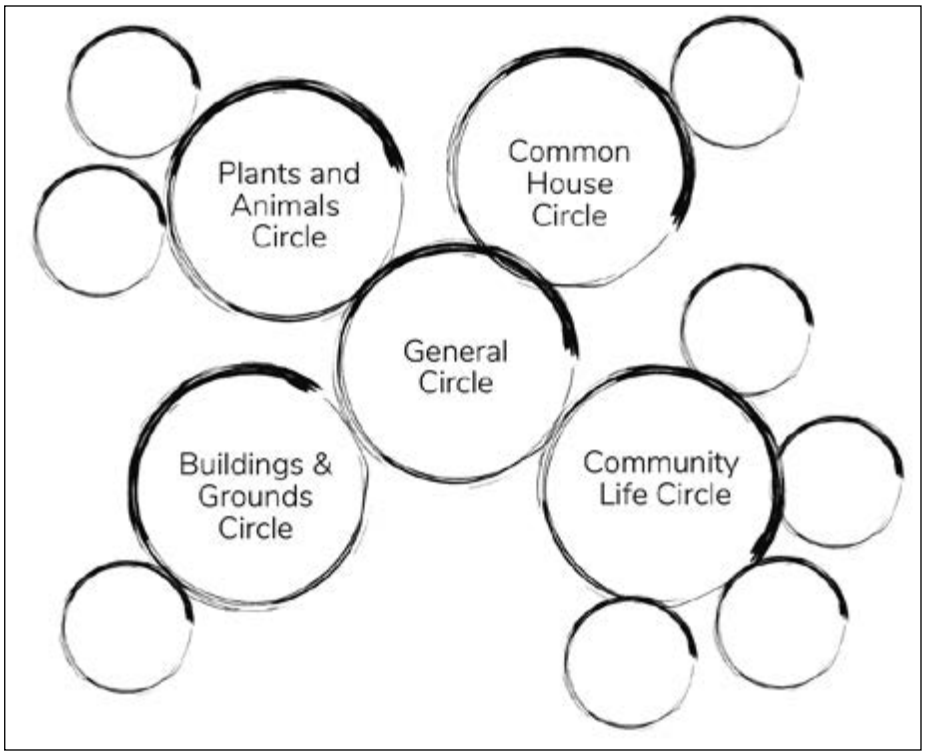
If someone objects, they do that because they want to further the circle's shared aim, and objecting is necessary to improve the proposal so we achieve our aim better.

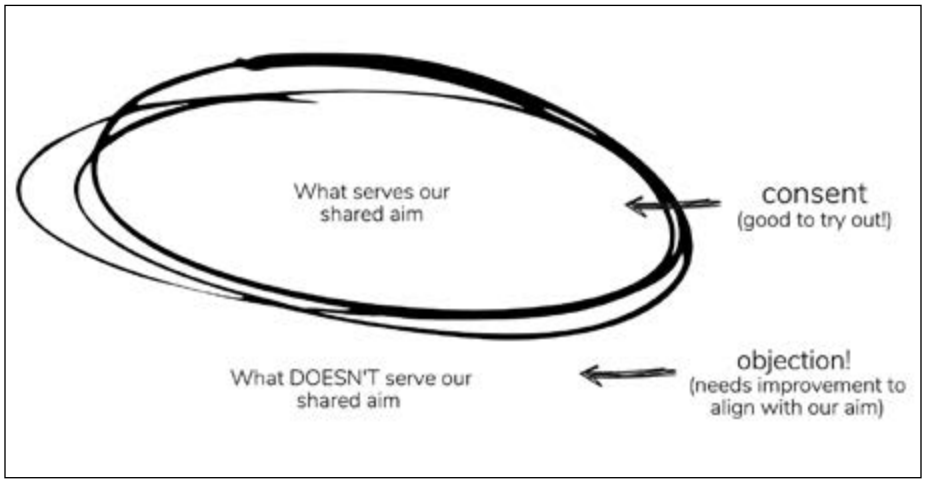
## We know how we decide...but who decides?

Another feature of sociocracy: our decision-making is *decentralized.* We have organized all decisions made in the community into "clusters" called domains. For example, all decisions made about the Common House are made by the Common House Circle. All decisions regarding infrastructure are made by Building and Grounds Circle, and so on. We've set up 16 nested and connected circles overall, each having authority in its domain.

This has two advantages:

- It's really clear who decides what. Everything is taken care of in small groups.
- Decision-making in small groups makes it easier to hear each other deeply than if the whole community were all together in one room.




I myself am a member of the Community Life Circle and the Governance Improvement Circle. That means, I am a decision-maker for all matters in the domains of those circles. But, for example, I am *not* a decision-maker in Buildings and Grounds Circle, or the circle for our plants and landscape, because I am not a member of those circles. That makes sense because I haven't worked on their issues for years, and I don't contribute immediately to the work in their domain. I hear their reports and they are there for my questions, and I trust them.

Why do I trust them? I was hoping you'd ask!

## Trusting that my voice will be heard– consent beyond one group

How do trust and voice scale beyond one group? In other words, how can my voice be heard when everyone might be a decision-maker somewhere but not everyone together in one group? Doesn't that mean I will be powerless if another group makes a bad decision?

Governing a community together is more than just a decision-making method. It's about flow of information, giving input, defining the clarity of domains—the many situations in which I either feel held and taken seriously, or I feel insecure and left out. We build trust over time and through actions:

- How well does the circle communicate new decisions?
- How well does the circle ask for input, and are they transparent about what they do with the input?
- How willing is a circle to listen when it's hard? Or maybe even to change a decision?

Yet there's also another side to this:

- How well am I following what circles are doing? Am I reading their emails?
- Do I show up and give feedback when a circle is asking for input? Do I come from a place of trust, and do I *assume best intentions* when I don't have complete information?
- Do I make an effort to *state my input respectfully?* Do I make an effort to accept a decision that is not my preference if it works well for the whole?

In my community, we have many practices that further balance between individuals and the circle work:

- Circles are nested and connected; a General Circle makes sure information flows together.
- Circles send brief one-paragraph reports after each circle meeting to everyone; full meetings notes are open to everyone.
- We have a standing agreement that any dissenting voice can visit a circle and be heard for 15 minutes by a circle we might disagree with.
- Our Care and Counsel Circle supports people in giving feedback effectively and respectfully; also to process our own response if necessary.
- An appeal process—note that in 10 years, the appeal process has never been applied. (Sometimes, I joke that we have an appeal process to put people at ease so that they can solve things more cooperatively instead of escalating disagreements. It's like bringing an umbrella so that it doesn't rain!)
- Circles ask for input in all-member meetings and by email.
- Circles make decisions for a certain term—decisions get reviewed and improved over time, based on experience and feedback that we gather over time.

## Some lessons learned

Before sociocracy, this community operated by whole-group consensus since 1994. The transition, while smooth,

wasn't without bumps in the road. Some bumps, it seems to me, were necessary to bring home the insights into how the differences worked.

A circle changed a policy so adult children who have moved out but are visiting didn't have full member rights anymore. One community member had their son visit and learned that the exercise room was not open to his son anymore. It was news to him, and he was devastated about it. Lots of listening later, he acknowledged that while the circle had made a decision that he didn't like, he, on the other hand, had ignored the circle's emails preparing the decision and asking for input and opinions on several occasions. He also learned more reasons behind the decision. In this way, responsibility goes both ways.

Another story is still very vivid in my memory because it happened in a circle I was a member of. After years of tension around the topic of outdoor cats, it was the first issue we addressed after adopting sociocracy. The decision wasn't an easy one: about one-third of the community wanted *no limit* on outdoor cats; one-third of the community wanted *no* outdoor cats, and about one-third of the community couldn't care less. Any decision one makes in this kind of situation is "wrong." So, knowing that there was no good outcome, we focused on clear process instead.

To prepare the decision, we surveyed, we hosted community conversations, and we developed a proposal. After several rounds of feedback from many community members, we made a decision[1] that was unpopular but respected. The decision has since been reviewed with minor revisions, but the overall policy has been in place for many years. There are no tensions about the topic anymore. I hold that story as a story of success. Most community members, it seems, appreciated that a decision was made, and that it was made with integrity and full transparency.

## Being in consent

Being in consent, to me, is not only about the mechanics of decision-making. It's not an act that happens once. To me, it's a state of being. It's the trust that things are taken care of, that I will remain informed, and that I can be heard if necessary, that I have resources to help me work through things.

Consent is not about being in control of everything. It's not even about having been asked about everything. It's about allowing for things to flow, with me and without me, and about knowing that if the flow stops, we know how to get back into a place of balance and connection.

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*Ted Rau moved to Pioneer Valley cohousing in Massachusetts in 2012 and lives there now with his five kids between 8 and 17, and his partner. He is the cofounder of Sociocracy For All (www.sociocracyforall.org), a nonprofit organization striving to make consent-based governance accessible and doable. He is a transgender male, enjoys writing articles and music, and he enjoys teaching meeting facilitation. Contact him at ted@sociocracyforall.org.*

Photos courtesy of Ted Rau

1. The decision, roughly, was to limit to five outdoor cats, keep a file of photos of all outdoor cats, have a designated role of the "pet point person" to address concerns, and require "reading this document, talking with their neighbors, and meeting with a group of people designated by the Community Life Circle. The purpose of this is to ensure that any new outdoor cat owner is conscious of a cat's impact on the community and our outdoor cat history." That way, each new cat owner needs to talk to the anti-cat people and have a meaningful connection.

# Two First Things in Building Collective Action

*By Michael Johnson*

*I spoke this piece at a recorded webinar (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASODjikPhVY) put on by the Foundation for Intentional Community in mid-February 2021. The whole two-hour webinar was pretty good. I began speaking my piece at the 45:19 mark. I've adapted it a bit for publication in the Grassroots Economic Organizing Collective blog (geo.coop/blog/two-first-things-building-collective-action) and now,* Communities.

I have put 40 years into building and sustaining an urban intentional community of substantial size—the Ganas Community (ganas.org) in Staten Island, New York. We began with seven, reached 100 in the '90s, and settled in at around 65 ever since. I have also studied collective action groups out in the regular world, especially worker cooperatives and solidarity economic groups.

So, do I have anything useful to pass on? I think so. At least a couple.

For me there is one lesson that stands out above all others in starting a community or collective action group: the group that starts and sustains the project has to **learn how** to talk to each other about the problems they have with each other.

Talking with each other about such problems will be the #1 challenge you will have in starting your group, in running your group, and in sustaining your group.

It will be the alpha and omega of your effort.

It is the #1 challenge of all collective action groups. And it is very difficult and never-ending.

It's easy to say what is necessary to make this kind of communication work well. I will summarize that in terms of two things. And I can tell you that here at Ganas the central group is into its 40th year of learning them:

- Learning to want to hear and understand the other, especially when there is a conflict.
- Learning to be willing to disclose what is happening for you and what you want, especially in the context of a difficult problem.

The first one requires setting aside your conviction of how right you are. You will always have that conviction, and it will probably be the major obstacle to all of your learning. In addition, it's usually a pain in everyone else's ass.

The second one means to be willing to take the risks involved in moving into your vulnerability. We are all afraid to do that.

Why are these two things so difficult to do, you might ask? (Or, maybe you don't need to ask.) Since we don't have 6-12 months to address that question, let me just say this:

All of us start out being in deep conflict between our self-centeredness and our cooperativeness. We are always both. That is the nature of being a human being. In addition, Evolution clearly points out that a small group is the easiest place for self-centered behavior to thrive.

And then there is the blame game. Just think of the mutual blaming that happens when someone feels hurt by another. The impulse to attack and the impulse to defend trigger each other almost instantly. It's the most effective way to defeat problem-solving.

Or, there is the virtually unsolvable problem of people not doing what they say they are going to do. Or, at least, what I think they should be doing. It is so easy not to see the trouble I made.

Okay. That's the hard side.

Let me close on two positive notes.

First, there is a very reliable framework for a group to use in dealing with a collective problem—and you will find out that almost all relational problems in a community will have collective impact.

At Ganas we call it **Compassionate Inquiry**. To solve this kind of a problem you need to know what the problem is. Know that the blame-and-defend game almost always lacks critical information.

Here are two questions to get a Compassionate Inquiry up and running:

- What is happening?
- What is wanted?

The first question seeks for everyone involved to share what they know and find out as much as possible as to what is going on. This can take a long time, much persistence, and lots of compassion. After all, who gets excited about speaking truth to one's partners, or much less receiving it? Remember the first two things:

- Learning to want to hear and understand the other, especially when there is a conflict.
- Learning to be willing to disclose what is happening for you and what you want, especially in the context of a difficult problem.

So beware of the blame game. These two questions are designed to help everyone move out of blaming and into wanting to hear and willing to disclose.

When these two questions begin to get everyone focused on a win-win outcome, your group will begin to hum with positive energy. There will be more willingness for YES and less for NO. If this dynamic continues, the discussion will naturally begin to move to the third question:

- What options are there for solving our problem?

When the discussion takes that turn, it will be due to two events: many are now better informed, and cooperation has begun to reign.

My second positive note is a profound appreciation for what you are considering to take on. Collective action is a primary driver of human evolution. Here in the 2020s we are in a constellation of crises that are transforming our world. Our capacity for small group collective action is too under-developed to rise adequately to the occasion. You are on the front lines.

There is something special about small groups. They were the **only** social environment for almost all of our 1,000,000 year evolutionary history. Like the cells of our bodies, they need to remain the building blocks of modern large-scale societies. That is, your venture isn't **just** about your community or group. And collective action groups are not **just** about their movement. In the words of the great anthropologist Margaret Meade, "Never doubt that a **small group** of thoughtful committed individuals can change the world. In fact, it's the only thing that ever has." (emphasis added)

That's what your venture will be about.

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*Michael Johnson cofounded the Ganas Community (ganas.org) in Staten Island, New York in 1980: in part a place to live and work together, in part an experiential research center in democratic culture and, for 20 years, a transformative community of practice. He has been immersed in the cooperative/solidarity economic movements since 2007 with the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives (New England), Grassroots Economic Organizing Collective (GEO) (geo.coop), and Solidarity NYC (solidaritynyc.org). In 2021 he launched the Growing Democracy Project (growingdemocracyproject.org). It advocates for a new kind of civic educational programming for promoting deep and strong mini-cultures within local communities and organizations. It seeks to enable everyday citizens to make democracy the most potent political force in the United States.*

# Community: Three More "F" Words

*By Vivian Vaillant*

Photos courtesy of Vivian Vaillant

***Editor's Note:*** *This article arrived too late to appear in our Spring 2021 "Faith in Community" issue, but we believe it is perennially relevant, including to our current theme.*

Do I have faith in community? The simple answer is "Yes. Of COURSE I do." I think I have always believed that our fates are intimately tied into the deep living and connection that we experience with other people. From the very first time I walked with my mother to drop off a banana bread to a new neighbor, I've believed in community. But I wonder: if community is so important, why can it also be so hard?

I wish I could ask my grandmother how she experienced community while she raised seven children in a homestead in northern Alberta. I know that to the end of her days she refused to lock her doors "in case someone needed to get in," and I know that all the families marked their pies differently at the many gatherings in the community hall that was attached to the church they attended every Sunday. Was it easier then? Or did they understand things about community that we have lost along our way? When I start to think wistfully about these times and mourn the loss of deep community for our society, I need to remind myself that there are many things from her time I would never want to live with, so I guess I have to focus instead on where we are today and what I know we need to understand better to support our faith in community.

When I first moved from the suburbs to the ecovillage I didn't understand these things. In retrospect, I would argue that I was actually really bad at all of them. I knew I believed in the importance of community, and so moving into a neighborhood with others who shared this belief seemed like the answer. I loved the shared meals and the way my children could play outside until the streetlights came on. Some of my most cherished memories date from those years. At the same time, I felt really bad at it. I had never been to meetings like these ones. I had never collaborated with people in a way where fast results were less important than hearing every voice and weighing all the options. True, we might have moved through decisions faster had we all been able to quit our day jobs, but even then, I don't think I had the skills to uphold my belief that community was the answer to all our problems. Looking back, sometimes community felt like the cause of all my problems!

And yet, here we are, looking for land for another project closer to where our lives have taken us.

Faith in community? Yes, absolutely. However there are some other "F" words that I think we need to understand first. Don't worry! You can say these words in public! I promise.

**Facilitation.** I have been meaning to poll the outside world. I'd like to find out: Do I know what this word means only because of my time at the ecovillage? Or is this skill something that the outside world knows about that I just missed? I will never forget my first few facilitated meetings in the village. If I can make the comparison, I feel like it was similar to the time when my grandmother took us square dancing. These people knew a complex set of steps that they seemed to be doing all together with such great ease! And then there was me, flopping about. Participating with great flamboyance and joy, but possibly stepping on all the toes!

I am deeply grateful to the members who had been there longer than me who guided me along those meetings, but I don't think I really understood how to be facilitated. There was a small team of people who had taken special facilitation trainings, but I wasn't one of them. I didn't truly understand this art until I found myself back out in "the normal world" again and

realized that the lack of good facilitation was an accepted norm. Even with my tiniest facilitation tool belt I could see that I was able to shift the energy in meetings so meaningfully that people would actually come up to me and ask, "How did you do that?" This knowing of an unknowing became an obsession for me and I've gobbled up all the information I can find.

Even if you feel too shy or believe you could never facilitate a meeting, it is worth learning as much as you can about this magical craft. At worst, becoming aware of how facilitation works will make you easier to facilitate, and at best, as we all start to understand the invisible dynamics in a room, we can all move from taking things personally and start to work better together.

Something I see communities do often and out of need is that they rely on their own community members for facilitation. On one hand, I understand that having an outside facilitator might be cost prohibitive. On the other, can a community member truly remain neutral about important issues? If a good facilitator is to remain neutral, is it fair to expect a small group of community members to take this role on and never have their own opinion? I'm not sure, but I see value in having an outside facilitator who could visit regularly and keep things on track—similar to a group coach of sorts who may not play in the game, but who plays a role by sitting on the sidelines.

**Followership** is required of us exponentially more often than leadership, and yet the subject is almost ignored in academics. Who, after all, wants to say they've received a Masters in "followership"? Our society has tied some gruesome context to the word. When we speak of followers we think of sheep, or victims who are being blindly led to a miserable end. Anyone who has ever tried to lead other people will tell you that it is virtually impossible to lead a group where they don't want to go. That said, when a group feels frustrated that they are not getting where they want to be, the easy thing to do is to blame the leader, but we aren't off the hook that fast.

I believe that if we want to be delivered from the world's problems through community we must change our relationship to followership. Simply, we need to learn how to follow well. Too often I hear people have written angry letters to a politician, or I hear people complaining about a leader in such a way that not only diminishes the leader, but cuts the followers from the results they are looking for. I think we forget that our leaders are not our enemy. After all, we are not sheep. The leader is not taking us to slaughter. The leader is another one of us, who is willing to put their energy and time towards a goal we will benefit from. Will they get it right? That will depend on our followership.

If we want to get to where we are going we must allow our leaders the grace of good feedback that comes from a belief that they are on our side. When we don't understand something we should ask good questions directly to the leader rather than writing an angry reply-all. We have to support them by doing the simple things they may require of us in a timely manner. If our community leaders are willing to do the work of planning an event—say a barn dance—the least we can do is RSVP and sign up on a clean-up crew. City Council doing an official community plan? Take 10 minutes and fill out their survey. I can't think of an example where a community member is doing more than 10 percent of what a leader puts into an event. When we are lucky enough to have willing leaders in our community we can offer good followership in gratitude.

**Fun.** It is really the most important F-word with regards to my faith in community. Have you ever noticed how time flies when you're having fun? How work can feel lighter and life feel fuller? There are times when I think we forget about fun. As humans we often put a furrow in our brow and take ourselves very seriously. This can lead to a heaviness in community that makes it hard to want to dive in. I believe that it is actually possible to make great headway and move huge mountains while still having fun.

This has been the backbone of most of my community building. I do my best to have as few meetings as possible. I ask myself what fun could be had when work needs to be done. I plan around the fun because I know my community will come together for the fun, accidentally get the work done, and then we can have a quick meet-and-plan session after the fun for the next event. An example of this was the school garden I brought to life. I would plan an art project for the families at the school. As the kids were painting, the parents would pick up shovels and move mountains of soil. As the work was getting done I'd ask people what they'd like to see next and people would take on roles for the next monthly meeting. We put a full garden together over one school year with 60 families, 10 teachers, and not a single meeting. The families had fun and the school got a great garden space, but I'd argue the most important thing we all got was community.

These days it can be easy to become disconnected and disgruntled with community but it truly is the key to our time on this planet. If we can focus less on the quality of the community we have now, and more on honing our facilitation skills, practicing great followership, and looking for ways to cultivate fun, then our communities will thrive. Through a vibrant community, I have faith the rest will follow.

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*Vivian Vaillant practices intentional community while living in unintentional community on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. She spends her time facilitating workshops that help people work better with the people they are with.*

# Navigating a Sea of Obstacles: The 15-Year Journey to Fair Oaks EcoHousing

*By Marty Maskall*

View of Entry to Fair Oaks EcoHousing — Architecture by McCamant and Durrett c. 2014

In Fall 2003, I visited my friend Don's home in downtown Sacramento. When I looked out his kitchen window, I saw a number of other homes facing each other, all with porches, and all facing a beautiful shared green. One of the homes was much larger. My mind was blown. I asked my friend to explain. He said he lived in cohousing. I said, "Co-What?"

He said cohousing offers a balance of privacy and community, and it's a wonderful way to live. He said the larger home was the Common House, where they have several shared meals every week and frequent parties. As someone who was used to the isolation of the suburbs, I immediately concluded this was a better way to live—safer, and much more fun. It was truly love at first sight for me, and I decided I wanted to live in cohousing too. I knew we needed more cohousing communities, and I vowed to start a new community as soon as I could.

In February 2005, I started to investigate cohousing, and I bought every book I could find on the subject. I learned that cohousing offers a balance of privacy and community. You have privacy in your home and community at your doorstep. By combining private homes with a shared clubhouse, garden, and extensive common facilities, residents experience the feeling of a small village where neighbors know and care about each other. The clubhouse, or Common House, is a hub of social activity for the residents. All homes are owned by individual families, as with other market-rate condominiums. (Many more details, including the history and extent of the cohousing movement and its participating groups—160-strong as of this writing—are available at www.cohousing.org).

My next step was to call Charles Durrett in Nevada City and meet with him to learn what it would take to start a cohousing community. He was very encouraging, and I was inspired to look for land in Fair Oaks, near my home.

In Spring 2005, we began the search for land. I wanted three to five acres of land so we could have 30 to 35 homes. I looked for land everywhere I went, and I developed a spreadsheet with over 100 pieces of property—some listed by realtors, but many I had found on my own. One of the most exciting pieces I found was at 4025 New York Avenue in Fair Oaks. I spotted the property, knocked on the door, and discovered the owner was open to selling. By August, we had an agreement. We were very sad when the deal fell apart because the owner wanted more money.

After that disappointment, we kept looking. We had public slide shows with lots of publicity. In 2006, an owner of property in Orangevale called us and said he would sell his 3.5 acres of land to us. By then we had four families on board. We all loved the land, so we started the design process with McCamant & Durrett Architects. Unfortunately, we were about to run into the twin obstacles of neighborhood opposition and a looming recession. This was a character-building time for us!

## The Sea of Obstacles

In 2007 we tried valiantly to get our Orangevale project approved. At our first hearing, over 100 neighbors showed up in opposition. They objected to our requested rezone (from four homes per acre to 10 homes per acre). They said we were ruining their rural lifestyle. We didn't think they were fair, because we were next to commercial property and one block away from a major boulevard. We learned that many neighbors thought that cohousing was a great idea, but we should build it somewhere else. We didn't get support from elected officials because they didn't want to antagonize their voters.

By Summer 2007, it was obvious that a recession was coming. We had no choice but to walk away from the Orangevale property. We lost our deposit and money we had spent on design fees. But we still wanted cohousing, so we kept looking for land that would work out better.

In Fall 2009, we partnered with a developer on land in Folsom—a beautiful 3.5-acre parcel only two blocks from the light rail station. This time it was on land zoned commercial, so we figured it would not be a problem. Wrong again. We still hit neighborhood opposition, and the elected officials did not want to support us against the opposition. And we were still in a recession.

Our group stayed together socially, but we were in a holding pattern, hoping for better days.

## Help from the Angels

By Fall 2013, it was becoming obvious that the Folsom project was not going to go forward. In December 2013, I got a call


Photos courtesy of Marty Maskall

## Why EcoHousing?

EcoHousing allows community members to "tread lightly" on the earth by combining *Smart Growth*, *Green Design*, and *Quality of Life*:

• **Smart Growth:** Infill development reduces suburban sprawl. Walkable neighborhood and on-site activities lower the need for driving.

• **Green Design** includes energy-efficient buildings, environmentally-friendly building materials, a small footprint, fruit trees, organic gardens, and rain gardens (on-site water retention).

• **Quality of Life:** Sense of community in a safe and nurturing environment, with a 3800 s.f. shared Common House and swimming pool and spa. Community is the secret ingredient of sustainability because people help each other learn to be good stewards of the land. On-site activities enable residents to socialize close to home and reduce their need to drive as much for day-to-day activities.

In 2016, the Environmental Council of Sacramento (ECOS) endorsed Fair Oaks EcoHousing, and I was proud to be named Environmentalist of the Year by ECOS.

–MM

## What Are the Benefits of Cohousing?

Cohousing offers privacy in your home and community at your doorstep. For introverts, that makes it really easy to connect with social activities. For me, there are three major benefits:

• **Connection:** Human beings are social animals. Social isolation is as dangerous to your health as smoking. Or, alternatively, socializing is as good for your health as regular exercise. I've heard that being socially connected extends your life by an average of seven years.

• **Convenience:** In cohousing, social activities are frequent and easy to arrange. Common meals are an affordable offering for your family, or an easy social night for yourself. And for those on a tight time budget, eating common dinners can cut down on preparing for nightly, single-family meals. Many communities purchase in bulk, so it's not unreasonable to have a filling dinner for $4 to $5 in the clubhouse. Guests can reserve rooms in the Common House, so you don't have to find them a hotel nearby or rush to clear out your spare bedroom.

• **Safety:** In cohousing, it's easy to get help from a neighbor if you need it. In the suburbs, where I lived, it's a different story. A few years ago, my 90-year-old neighbor Rose fell in her garage. She couldn't get up and she couldn't call for help because she wasn't wearing her panic button. She was forced to lie on the cold garage floor all night. Early the next morning, I delivered her paper to her. She heard me and yelled for help. I called 911 and saved her life. That sad story reminded me of the benefits of being in community, because we look after each other much more than in traditional suburban neighborhoods.

There are many other benefits too–see "Why Cohousing?" at www.cohousing.org/why-cohousing.

–MM

from my friend Don in the Fair Oaks Chamber telling me that the property on New York Avenue had a For Sale sign. He said the neighbors wanted us to buy it because they preferred our owner-occupied cohousing homes to apartments, which is what they thought any other developer would build. I felt like a big angel had just landed on my shoulder! In addition to being the size and the price we wanted, the property was already rezoned for 30 homes. After our two experiences of trying (and failing) to get land rezoned, we knew this was a huge blessing. I asked our consulting architects Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant to look at the property. They gave it a green light, and so our group of three households (Roz, Greg, and I) decided to move forward as quickly as possible. We called ourselves Fair Oaks EcoHousing.

The second angel came in the form of publicity. My friend Elise was a writer for the *American River Messenger*. In February 2014, she taught us how to craft our story so that it would get attention. We were rewarded with front page spreads in the local paper. That helped us attract future residents.

The third angel came from a neighbor of our property. In March 2014, she called me and told me she had just "liberated her IRA" and was about to invest in EcoHouse Brazil. Having found out about Fair Oaks EcoHousing, she asked if she could invest in our project. We were shocked and thrilled. We said yes, of course, and prepared the necessary paperwork.

There was a lot of work ahead for us, but we were extremely grateful for help from the angels!

### Construction

Future residents of Fair Oaks EcoHousing eagerly watched the progress of construction, which started in December 2017. After several rainy months of installing the infrastructure, the buildings started to emerge.

Future residents were allowed on the property once a month to see the progress. It was an exciting time for all of us. We had hoped our homes would be ready for move-in by June 2019, 18 months after the start of construction.

Unfortunately, there were many construction delays, including COVID-19 delays. In June 2020, after 30 months, excited residents started moving into their new homes. As of August 2020, all 30 homes were sold, and nearly all residents had moved in.

### Was It Worth It?

This has certainly been the longest and most difficult project of my life. Fortunately, my reluctant partner Subhash decided he'd give cohousing a try. We're still getting settled, but after a year of living in cohousing, I can definitely answer YES! to the question of "Was It Worth It?"

My office looks out on the southern end of our community, and I can see the comings and goings. I can even go down and chat if I see someone that I want to talk to.

Every evening Andy and Linda take their dog Barney for a walk. I don't have a dog, and Barney really responds to any friendly touch. Now he looks toward our door whenever he's in the neighborhood, hoping I'll come out and pet him. Often, I do.

Now that we have all been vaccinated, we can get together more

easily. We have had many birthday parties. Usually, we just hand out cupcakes, but Subhash wanted a full-fledged party with Indian food, so that's what we provided. We asked people to bring their own chairs, and we all sat outside and had a good time.

After dinner, many of us stroll on our walkways in front of our homes—just like the Italian tradition. We have three little girls, aged two, three, and five, and they love running down the walkways. Sometimes I see the older one on her scooter, with the other two trying to keep up, and with Grandpa bringing up the rear. Subhash loves talking to the little kids and showing them how to use the hose to water the plants.

The best part was a ceremony to honor me and the Construction Interface Team (CIT), a four-person committee that has represented the owners' group during the 30-month construction process. The community bought two Adirondack chairs for the Common House patio. They each have a plaque honoring us, one for the CIT and one for me. They celebrated our vision and persistence in bringing Fair Oaks EcoHousing to completion. I told them normally you don't get a plaque until after you're dead!

Was it worth it? It certainly was, and I look forward to many happy years in cohousing.

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*Marty Maskall is a retired web designer, author, and publisher. She has published two books of inspiring quotations:* The Attitude Treasury: 101 Inspiring Quotations*, and* The Athena Treasury: 101 Inspiring Quotations by Women*. Her other interests include Toastmasters, traveling, hiking, swimming, and bird-watching. She has lived in Fair Oaks, California since 1981, and enjoys attending the festivals, park concerts, and plays in the Amphitheater in Fair Oaks Village. For more information on Fair Oaks EcoHousing, visit www.FairOaksEcoHousing.org.*

## Ten Tips for Success in Building a Cohousing Community

- **Join if you can!** It's much easier to join an existing community than to start a new one.
- **Appreciate the efforts** of others who start a community–they need our support.
- **Get good help.** We hired Katie McCamant of CoHousing Solutions, and that has made a world of difference.
- **Learn all you can.** Go to every Cohousing Conference. Buy the Cohousing books. Go to events and ask questions. Get leadership training.
- **Sell your vision** to get others on board.
- **Get land as soon as possible.** Until you get land, nothing is real.
- **Avoid rezones.** Rezones are difficult and contentious.
- **NIMBY abounds.** Recognize that virtually everyone opposes development in their neighborhood. Most are NIMBY (NotInMyBackYard) neighbors, many are BANANA (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anything).
- **Persist and avoid getting discouraged.** Obstacles are everywhere. Nothing takes the place of persistence.
- **Protect your health.** Strive for balance, eat well, have fun, and get enough sleep.

–MM

Fair Oaks EcoHOUSING

# REACH

REACH is our column for all your Classified needs. In addition to ads intended to match people looking for communities with communities looking for people, Reach offers ads for events, land, internships, services, books, personals, and more to people interested in communities.

You may contact our Advertising Manager, Joyce Bressler, to place a Reach ad. Email ads@gen-us.net, call 845-558-4492, or go to gen-us.net/communities for more information.

THE REACH DEADLINE FOR ISSUE #193 - Winter 2021 (out in December) is October 29th, 2021.

The rate for Reach ads is…. Up to 50 Words: $25/issue or $100/year; Up to 100 Words: $50/issue or $200/year; Up to 250 Words: $75/issue or $300/year.

You may pay using a credit or debit card, bank transfer, or PayPal by contacting the Advertising Manager, or mail a check or money order payable to COMMUNITIES with your ad text, word count, and duration of the ad, plus your contact information, to: Attn.: Communities, Chris Roth, 330 Morgan Street, Oberlin, Ohio 44074.

## COMMUNITIES WITH OPENINGS

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**VALLEY OF LIGHT IS A COMMUNITY FOR CULTURAL CREATIVES** that rests along the New River in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. With $2 million invested, our 23-acre campus is debt-free and includes 7 homes, 5 new building pads, campground, barn, garden, "Peace Pentagon" conference and community center, and other amenities. We share our campus with The Oracle Institute, an educational charity that operates a spirituality school, award-winning press, and peacebuilding practice. We seek co-founding members in five Paths: Native (farmers, animal & land stewards); Scientist (health & tech); Artisan (art, music, construction); Peacemaker (teachers & activists); Oracle (spiritual seekers). Visit: www.TheOracleInstitute.org/about-our-community & www.PeacePentagon.net; Contact: Info@ValleyofLight.org

**COWEETA HERITAGE CENTER AND TALKING ROCK FARM** are located in the mountains of Western North Carolina in a beautiful and diverse temperate rainforest. CHC is looking for others who would like to join together to form an Intentional Community embracing the principles of Voluntary Simplicity and Healing the Earth and Each Other. Simply put, we wish "to live simply so that others may simply live." It is a recognition that nature provides us with valuable services and resources that we can use to enrich our lives. Utilizing local resources, appropriate technology, and working cooperatively, we can discover creative ways to meet our needs as "directly and simply as possible." Come join Coweeta and learn how to live lightly on the land and enjoy the Earth's bounty! Contact Coweeta for more info or to schedule a visit!! Contact Paul at coweeta@gmail.com. Visit Coweeta on the web at www.coweetaheritagecenter.com

**MORNINGLAND COMMUNITY** is offering work/study opportunities for those interested in deepening their meditation practice to include contemplative service. Some co-housing available. Our community is offline, digitally unplugged, and a great place to catch your breath. Call 562.433.9906 for more information and to apply. "Simple living and high thinking" – Yogananda. 2600 E. 7th St, Long Beach, CA 90804

**RETIRE IN BELIZE** This retirement Community could be a resource for placing persons in a village atmosphere at a reasonable cost. This is a village within a village. Riverside and Cuxlin Ha communities are Christian-based but represent many religions such as Baptists, Roman Catholic, Community of Christ, Seventh Day Adventists, Salvation Army, House of Prayer and no religion. All are a child of God. All must learn to work together. It takes a lot of love, patience and forgiveness to grow self and community. Riverside Community provides the opportunity to enhance your life by giving and receiving your talents, time and love. We need you; you need us. Live the abundant life. Be creative and fulfilled. Don't be lonely anymore. Live the good life in Southern Belize, in a village by a river that goes to the Caribbean Sea. Here you will find Security, Peace, and happiness at Riverside Retirement Village. Stable Government | Good water | English speaking. Average temperature 82 degrees. Part of our village is also retirement facilities for assisted-living and total-care. Houses or apartments are available. Lots are available to build your own house. Land is available from 5 acres to 300 acres. Also, you can live in Riverside Retirement Village for as little as US$500 per month. This includes fine housing, food, electricity, and water or up to US$5,000 depending on your needs and wants. Contact Email: gaylerscafe@gmail.com Phone: 501-607-6777

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**HOMESTEAD IN VERMONT** - Good responsible people wanted to help build a small spiritually-


oriented intentional community and homestead farm on beautiful 8 acres in southern Vermont, starting in late 2021. Open to people of all tolerant spiritual paths, who are focused on self-awareness and spiritual development, wanting to support others in their development, and with skills and experience in gardening, land maintenance, and sustainable living. Possibility of creating a spiritual retreat center on the land. Seeking kind, compassionate, caring, and emotionally mature people of integrity who are good at communicating, resolving conflict peacefully, and working together. Must be non-smokers, with minimal alcohol consumption, and mostly plant-based diet. And you love flowers! Land is a mix of open area and woods, large vegetable and flower gardens, fruits and berries, and a friendly flock of laying and non-laying hens. Current livable structures are large house, apartment, and finished barn. Also, rustic spaces for personal retreats, including a treehouse. There's space for portable living structures too. Friendly pets are welcome. Very important that you are interested in a long-term arrangement, shared responsibilities and co-management, and have the time and energy to make a true commitment. Contact Gary at gshapcrc@sover.net for more information.

## SEEKING OR FORMING COMMUNITY

SPIRITUAL ATHEISM: I am seeking connections and/or Intentional Community around Spirituality that is untied to metaphysical beliefs. I find Spirituality in nature, and in helping people heal from emotional wounds. I have volunteered / interned at a suicide hotline, an addiction center, and a hospital chaplaincy. Don: dsb2@bu.edu

RALSTON CREEK COHOUSING ARVADA, CO – Imagine an energetic group of eclectic families who value treading lightly on the land, with solar energy, a courtyard, parks, a community garden, and a view of the Rockies. We are a forming community using a pre-sold unit model to build a 3-story building with 12 one-story flats, "The Gatehouse." Already identified a builder and investors. Estimated cost $460 / square foot for 12 flats sized between 500 and 1,250 sq feet. Seeking members to join us and deposit on a specific unit. While they build the Gatehouse, we create the community. www.ralstoncreekcohousing.org

## SERVICES/OPPORTUNITIES/PRODUCTS

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

SEXUAL ASSAULT AND ABUSE IN INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES SUPPORT GROUP ON ZOOM. Talk about how to prevent it and how to heal together in our unique lives. Email for information at homeschoolvideo@gmail.com

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## PUBLICATIONS, BOOKS, WEBSITES, WORKSHOPS

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rest of us communitarians gathering that autumn week, had the realization there were a growing number of communities transitioning to ecovillages throughout the Americas, and ENA could bring them together, crossing cultures, languages, ecosystems, and political boundaries in a united effort to heal Mother Earth and redesign the human presence on the planet through the example of ecovillages.

At our first meeting I introduced myself to Linda and her partner at the time, Kailash. They struck me as a power couple right from the start. Kailash was a fine musician who performed jazz music on classical guitar, and he was also somewhat of a computer wizard in the early days of the internet. I said "Hi, I'm Giovanni," and Linda immediately showed her warmth and sense of connection. "Hi Gio," she said. That was the very first time anyone called me Gio. Since then the name has stuck among all my ecovillage friends, and even my old school friends started calling me Gio. That was Linda's gift.

We met many times after that first meeting at The Farm to continue building the ENA network, with Linda and Kailash continuing to play a key role. After meetings at Sirius in Massachusetts, Sunrise Farm in Ontario, and LA Eco-Village, we finally brought the core group to EarthArt Village in Crestone, Colorado, Linda and Kailash's own ecovillage project in the shadows of the Sangre de Cristo mountains. Those were times of great excitement and determination, with a healthy dose of chaos. Linda was a master organizer and administrator, which came in handy as we needed some order and follow-through from all those meetings. She had a knack for group process, budgets, event organizing, legal issues, and all things having to do with nonprofits and spiritual centers. She'd learned NGO administration when, after leaving New York and a career in nursing, she worked for the Manitou Foundation in Crestone, making land grants accessible to spiritual groups in the Crestone area.

It was a time of change, integration, and discovery, as we worked hard to bridge the ecovillage movement throughout North and South America, crossing language barriers as well as cultural and political divides. In 1998 Linda traveled to Mexico for an ENA meeting at Huehuecoyotl, my ecovillage, which was becoming the center of the ecovillage network for Latin America. Thanks to the work of the *Caravana Arcoiris por la Paz* (Rainbow Caravan of Peace), a bus caravan of ecological activists traveling through many countries in Latin America for 13 years, and Linda's amazing organizational skills, several representatives from South American communities now attended our meetings. A year later, in 1999, Linda helped me organize a meeting of the GEN board in Huehuecoyotl. Things were moving fast.

It was a time of change, integration, and discovery, as we worked hard to bridge the ecovillage movement throughout North and South America.

The year 2000, and a new millennium, gave us the opportunity to cross the north-south bridge and link the ecovillage movements in both continents, following in the path of the *Caravana Arcoiris*, which became increasingly involved in the ecovillage movement as it traveled throughout South America connecting with local communities. Our first bi-continent ecovillage gathering was when the ENA Council—Linda and myself and other ENA activists—traveled to the middle of the Darien Rainforest in Colombia to Sasardi, a community and rainforest protection project linked to a growing network of Latin American forest conservation and native rights organizations. Linda managed all logistics for the 20-plus people in that first gathering. While our journey took us deep into guerrilla territory under militia control, we made it without a scratch. Later, in 2003, Linda and Kailash managed registrations for the Call of the Condor, the first ENA gathering of North and South American ENA activists in Peru, organized by the Caravana with support from ENA, GEN, and numerous Latin American groups. It was here that Linda encouraged me to take a seat on the GEN Board to represent ENA and Latin American ecovillages. The GEN Board met again at Findhorn Community in Scotland in 2005 to celebrate GEN's 10th anniversary and the launching of the ecovillage educational nonprofit, Gaia Education. Linda was there too. We returned again to EarthArt Village in Colorado in 2009, by this

time as members of the GEN Board and representing ENA in the GEN International Network.

Linda continued to keep the books for both GEN and ENA while I served as President of the GEN Board. She also kept records of all organizational details for both networks as they struggled to become more self-sufficient. Linda was instrumental in 2012 in setting up and organizing the transformation of ENA, the ecovillage network of South, Central, and North America, to CASA (Council of Sustainable Settlements of Latin America), the ecovillage network of Latin America, which was able to define its own identity and autonomy, and opening up the opportunity to create GENNA (the GEN North America regional network) with the FIC (Foundation for Intentional Community), as well as forming GEN-US.

We met several times after that, as our friendship grew and developed into a wonderful ongoing collaboration in new directions within the network. We spoke many times on the phone to support each other, both as colleagues and as good friends. Giving each other advice on life, health, and work. I will greatly miss her wisdom and unconditional support.

Linda gently took me by the hand and guided me into a world that changed my life and inspired me for the next decade.

**Orlando Balbás**, *ecovillage activist originally from Venezuela, Nondual Coach, former GEN IS developer:*

I first met Linda in 2000 at an ecovillage in the Colombian jungle. She and her partner Kailash were there participating in the ENA Council's yearly meeting and it was love at first sight. The three of us connected at a subtle and yet deep level. About a year later Linda and Kailash invited me to visit them at EarthArt Village in Colorado to plan the creation of what later became known as GEN IS (GEN Information Systems). I remember the three of us sitting around a table after dinner conspiring to make it easier for ecovillagers in the Americas to connect with each other.

I was only taking my first steps in all things ecovillage, and Linda gently took me by the hand and guided me into a world that changed my life and inspired me for the next decade. She was a passionate and true believer in the ecovillage movement but she could also see through the veils of politics and the human issues that plagued the network. I remember her as a big-picture thinker who, without meaning to, taught me so much with her humor and compassion.

It saddens me that she's gone but I can only smile when I think of her.

**Hanne Strong**, *Danish ecological activist, cofounder in 1994 with her husband Maurice of the Manitou Foundation to preserve wildlife and the natural environment of the Baca Grande region of southern Colorado:*

We had the honor and privilege of working with Linda beginning in 1994 at the Manitou Foundation, in her role as Executive Director of the Foundation.

When Hildur Jackson, cofounder of GEN and Gaia Trust in Denmark in 1991, commissioned the Manitou Foundation to compile the first electronic list of ecovillages around the world, Linda facilitated the project. She consistently put deep thought, effort, and attention into her work, which was of high quality.

Linda not only had a remarkable capacity for organization and practical action, but was also deeply spiritual, and her devotion and faith guided her life. Everything had meaning. She knew how to listen; she was kind and empathetic and genuinely cared about the well-being of people and the planet. She believed strongly in the value of community and actively contributed to making her community in the Crestone area into a better place. She had a wonderful sense of humor and loved to laugh, even when difficulties arose. Some fun facts about Linda: after working her way through nursing school as a bartender in New York City and working as nurse in Florida for many

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years, she was the road manager for the band Kiss. She was a minister and married many couples. And she loved Star Trek!

Linda's presence was truly a gift. It was heartbreaking to learn of her passing and it will be difficult to adjust to life without her. Her unique spirit will have an enduring influence in the lives of those who knew and worked with her.

***Ross Jackson**, cofounder, Gaia Trust (1987), GEN (1995), and Gaia Education (2005):*

Linda was Executive Director of the Manitou Foundation, Maurice and Hanne Strong's inspiring Baca Grande project in Colorado, where Hanne brought together many diverse spiritual traditions at this sacred and ancient indigenous meeting place, and which my wife Hildur and I had the pleasure of visiting in 1989. I had many occasions to enjoy Linda's optimism and drive; for example, at the founding of GEN at the Findhorn Community in 1995, where she represented the Manitou Foundation, and later in St. Petersburg, Russia at a meeting of the GEN Board. GEN's Community Self-Assessment Program, which Linda developed, was a significant step forward for GEN.

***Albert Bates**, founder of the Ecovillage Training Center at The Farm in Tennessee, past president of Global Ecovillage Network, author of 20 books on history, ecology, and the future:*

It was a curious phenomenon of the early days of GEN, and maybe still, that many, like me, who had been living relatively cloistered lives as farmers and frugal communitarians were yanked out of our comfort zones and thrust into a fast-paced, globe-spanning whirl of bringing ecovillages to the world. We came to see that the ecovillage paradigm was an idea the world needed and that the only way anyone ever changes is by learning from and emulating actual examples.

We came to see that the ecovillage paradigm was an idea the world needed and that the only way anyone ever changes is by learning from and emulating actual examples.

I first met Linda in 1993 when I returned to Fjordvang in Thy, Denmark for a series of Gaia Trust meetings to discuss ecovillages as a global cultural change strategy. Linda was at that time running the Manitou Foundation in Colorado, a giant land trust of many spiritual centers founded by Maurice and Hanne Strong. Three years later we reunited at Findhorn for the launch of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), where I was nominated to be GEN's Organizing Secretary for the Americas. Ten years farther along, when I retired from the GEN Board, I passed the gavel to Linda. Our early seed funding was by then long gone and so it was a difficult period of financial contraction that Linda was called upon to manage. She did it masterfully.

In our years working side by side, Linda and I met at her home in Colorado and at mine in Tennessee, and had convened meetings at ecovillages in Italy, Germany, Australia, Palestine, Belgium, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Portugal, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Holland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Russia, and Turkey. I remember lavish rooms in the Pera Palace in Istanbul, the rustic mountain camp of Sasardi with stinging ants on the Darien Peninsula in Colombia, and rushing about getting public transport connections to UN summits in various world capitals. We met in active war zones and on thousand-year-old rooftop gardens with peacocks. We walked together past the Twin Towers less than an hour before the first plane hit on 9-11. (Linda then spent long days as a volunteer in a New York City call center responding to desperate relatives of the missing.) We climbed Machu Pichu for a vernal equinox sunrise, paused before Rembrandts at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, raised wine glasses on a terrace overlooking the Bosporus, and had beers under lanterns in Tivoli Gardens. (For more history of GEN and the worldwide ecovillage movement, see ecovillage.org/gen-history.)

Yet jet-setting was never something either Linda or I particularly relished. We were much more content to get up in the morning and groom a horse or collect eggs for

breakfast, then sit at our desks with a cup of steaming tea beside the keyboard and in the evening, strum guitars around a campfire. We had each of us found paradise already, why leave? If Linda were here, you would understand. You could see it from the fire in her eyes. She was 100 percent committed.

***Lois Arkin**, cofounder of Los Angeles Eco-Village, Executive Director of Los Angeles Ecovillage Institute, longtime activist in GEN, ENA, GENNA, and GEN-US:*

Linda manifested the big picture without ever losing sight of the smallest detail. She not only advanced GEN activities in the Americas and other parts of the world, but served as a County Commissioner in her Colorado county for two terms. She was a horse advocate and protector, a natural builder, and cofounder of EarthArt Village. I met Linda in the late 1990s when she hosted the first ENA meeting at her community, EarthArt Village. And what a hostess she was! She knew how to help folks help one another; she provided a space of love and caring. And our small group of ENA Board Members has pretty much stayed warmly connected to one another over the years. Things that might have been a frustration for so many others, Linda took in her stride, doing what needed to be done to help make the Earth more resilient and safer for everyone.

Things that might have been a frustration for so many others, Linda took in her stride, doing what needed to be done to help make the Earth more resilient and safer for everyone.

***Daniel Greenberg**, GEN-US Board Member, Director of CAPE Consulting, Director of Earth Deeds:*

I can't remember when I first met Linda, which is ironic since she was always some one I went to when I was confused about dates…or couldn't find the agenda to a meeting…or just wanted to bounce a new idea around…or dream big. With her infectious laugh and a twinkle in her eye, Linda was always someone I counted on to be there—as a colleague, a co-conspirator, and a friend.

While shy of the spotlight, Linda was behind the scenes of so many initiatives (e.g., GEN, ENA, GENNA, GEN-US, FIC) that it was easy to take her genius for granted. And now, the dawning realization of everything she was holding is causing many of us in the network to reel in disbelief and gratitude.

Thank you dear Linda for putting your shoulder to the grindstone of this Great Turning. You really changed the world! There will never be another like you, but the ecovillage movement and the world would be well served by more like you. May your spirit live on in those who follow.

***Diana Leafe Christian**, GEN-US Board Member:*

When Communities Editor Chris Roth asked if I knew of a nonprofit that might want to acquire the magazine after its previous publisher, the Foundation for Intentional Community (FIC), decided to stop publishing it, I recommended GEN-US. While I was jubilant that our small regional GEN network might publish this wonderful magazine, Linda, in her role as administrator of the GEN-US Board, was slogging through the actual work of assessing and lining up the financial and legal details to make sure we could do this. And we could! For this, and for so many other kind labors of love for individuals, ecovillages, and whole GEN regions, thank you, Linda, and bless you on your journey.

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*Diana Leafe Christian, editor of this collection of fond memories of Linda, is a Board Member of GEN-US and formerly served on the Boards of ENA and GENNA. Author of* Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities, *she lives at Earthaven Ecovillage in North Carolina.*

# Our Friend and Ecovillage Colleague Linda Joseph, 1952–2021

*By Giovanni Ciarlo, Orlando Balbás, Hanne Strong, Ross Jackson, Albert Bates, Lois Arkin, Daniel Greenberg, and Diana Leafe Christian*

Linda Joseph, friend and colleague to many in the ecovillage network worldwide, died suddenly on May 31st of this year after a brief illness. She was involved in GEN (Global Ecovillage Network International), ENA (Ecovillage Network of the Americas), GENNA (GEN-North America, now called ReGEN Alliance), and GEN-US, and was instrumental in the revival of Communities under GEN-US as new publisher in late 2019. Below, some of us who knew and worked with her share our fond remembrances.

**Giovanni Ciarlo**, *Interim CEO, Gaia Education; cofounder, Ecoaldea Huehuecoyotl; former president, GEN Board; Council Member, GEN-US:*

In my mind, Linda was the living archetype of everybody's friend. She made you feel like a special person from the first day you met, and in my case, every single time our lives crossed paths for the past 25 years.

I met Linda in 1996 at The Farm in Tennessee, where a group of communitarians came together at Farm member Albert Bates' invitation *(see below)* to dream about creating what became the Ecovillage Network of the Americas (ENA), an ambitious vision for uniting the communities movement—north, central, and south—throughout the Americas. Our goal was to make ENA a region of the Global Ecovillage Network then forming in Europe and worldwide. Linda, and the

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–**Christian Williams**, Editor, Utne Reader

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Founder of Mountainsong Expeditions

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–**Lisa and Belden Paulson, Ph.D.**,
cofounders of High Wind community

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