

# COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

Spring 2022 • Issue #194

## Looking Back, Looking Forward

Stumbling Toward Diversity

Remembering Tree Frog Farm

Especially Challenging Behaviors

Stories from a Country Commune

The Many Failed Theories of Twin Oaks



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Past, present, and future converge at Community Village, Oregon Country Fair, July 2019: Jenny Leis of Cedar Moon Community, a friend, a cell phone, and a copy of COMMUNITIES #180 bear witness to the enduring influence

of the 1960s counterculture as a front-cover scene from 2018 plays out again in real time a year later. Photo by Chris Roth.

# COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

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## Letters



## Narcissistic Parents

I was glad you published Diana Leafe Christian's article "Working with Especially Challenging Behaviors, Part One." But I was amazed that, in an issue devoted to the theme of "Children," she failed to discuss those who are most harmed by these attitudes and behaviors, namely the children of the adults exhibiting these behaviors. I know because I was one.

The narcissistic attitudes and behaviors listed in the article are about the exact opposite of what a child needs to experience from her parent in order to have a healthy childhood. Just like the story of Dwight in the article,

my mother would be on her best behavior around people she didn't know and on her worst behavior with those she was "close" to (her husband and children). Young children cannot protect themselves from a narcissistic parent by setting limits and boundaries as adults can, although we quickly learned to lower our expectations. Christian is certainly right that these people do not change.

If you know a narcissistic person, please don't get pregnant with them, and encourage them not to have children. If they already have children, those are the children who really need to receive love and attention from the other adults in your community, so consider letting the difficult person stay in the community for the sake of their children. If their children are old enough to read this article, please give it to them and discuss it with them. I did not learn about narcissistic personality disorder until years after I had mostly escaped my mother's influence, but it was still extremely helpful in understanding my childhood and why I still needed to set boundaries and limits with her.

Finally, I'd like to disagree with the implication of the article that anyone who experiences severe trauma at an early age inevitably becomes a narcissist. I think it is helpful to understand factors beyond the person's control that have led them in this direction, and I do have empathy for my mom's traumatic childhood, but many, many people with traumatic childhoods have not become narcissists, so it is not inevitable, and saying that it is seems like a way to let them off the hook for their behavior. I'd like to think that determination and courage to heal could change them, as it changed me, but that may just be the wishful thinking of my inner child. It takes self-awareness to change, and that is one thing they are lacking.

**Sharon Blick**  
Eugene, Oregon

### *The author responds:*

Dear Sharon,

Thank you very much for your insightful comments. Yes, the article didn't relate to the Winter 2021 issue theme of Children in Community. I'm not writing this article series

# Leaving Childhood Behind

By Stephen Wing

for Asa

on these behaviors to go with the issue theme, but rather simply to address this important issue.

Thank you also for your comments about narcissistic parents. While I agree that having narcissistic parents is an important topic, the article series doesn't address narcissistic attitudes and behaviors in parents or other family members, partners, at the workplace, or among friends. It only addresses how these can affect individual community members and whole communities, and what we can do to create more emotional safety.

You wrote of your concern the article implies "that anyone who experiences severe trauma at an early age inevitably becomes a narcissist," and shouldn't have implied it because it isn't true. I agree: it isn't true; I don't believe it either. I reread the article to try to find which part may have caused you to think I implied this. Was it the sentence about Dwight, "No wonder he acted like that?" In Dwight's case it was narcissistic behaviors he seemed to engage in rather than any of the other kinds of trauma-induced behaviors someone could have (borderline, histrionic, high anxiety, and so on) or, having no harmful behaviors at all. As in: *All cats are mammals, but not all mammals are cats*. All people who exhibit narcissistic behaviors as adults (probably) experienced trauma as a child. But not all traumatized children become adults with narcissistic behaviors. They certainly could develop other kinds of distressed attitudes and behaviors instead, or in some cases, develop no harmful behaviors at all.

Future articles will explore what we can do, as individuals, small groups of friends, or whole communities to protect ourselves and work effectively with these attitudes and behaviors when they occur "up close and personal" in our communities.

Thank you again for reading COMMUNITIES magazine, and for reading this article.

All good wishes,

**Diana Leaf Christian**

Black Mountain, North Carolina

I like the way you said it  
best: a ceremony for leaving childhood behind.  
Not that you will ever abandon  
the little boy inside you, playing hide-and-seek  
with the man you will become.  
They'll always play together if you let them.

It's just that at the moment  
you are neither, and the old games bore you, and  
the vast carnival looming ahead  
packed with mile after mile of grownup amusements  
has an armed guard at the gate.  
You carry the seed of manhood like a fake I.D.

So it's time to say goodbye  
to what you know, and step naked out on the air.  
Be glad you're not a sparrow!  
Be glad you aren't celebrating this initiation  
alone, or with your buddies  
and a bottle smuggled back from the other world.

We are here to take you with us  
into that other world. For thirteen years, like you,  
we watched our fathers and uncles,  
shuffled heroes and villains like baseball cards,  
learning as much from their mistakes  
as their heroic masculinity. And then it was our turn.

We are here to welcome you  
to the mystery of being a man. Not that some cool ritual  
can teach you how; we can only  
celebrate with you the necessity, the choice you've made  
to leave childhood behind. Stand  
holding hands in this circle to testify that we survived.

The best hope I can offer you  
after years of learning how is that your learning will be  
easier. We learned the hard way  
we didn't have to take the manhood we were offered;  
we could feel our way into the body  
of a human male and find a truer path. I hope you'll find yours too.

Because hidden in this hope for you,  
nephew, grows the kernel of our prayer for the psychopath  
Mankind. That he will at last  
grow up; accept his human incompleteness; stop trying to conquer,  
acquire, consume the rest of Creation.

Hey, you are the planet's newest seed! Let go of your twig and fly!

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

### COMMUNITIES Editorial Policy

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

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

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

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

### Submissions Policy

To submit an article, please first request Writers' Guidelines; email [editor@gen-us.net](mailto:editor@gen-us.net). To obtain Photo Guidelines, email [layout@gen-us.net](mailto:layout@gen-us.net). Both are also available online at [gen-us.net/communities](http://gen-us.net/communities).

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### What is an “Intentional Community”?

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

# Questions in Middle Age (or: COMMUNITIES Turns 50)



Chris Roth

The last couple years have been tough ones for nearly everyone. Covid has been just one of several contributors to the passing-away of people I have loved and been inspired by during my life—and to the changes many of us have confronted, not always by choice. Personal circumstances, broader social developments, and the theme of this issue (the first in our 50th-anniversary year) have all led to me to contemplate “Looking Back, Looking Forward” in a new set of ways.

Please have patience as I slow down a little, step back, postpone the excitement that this issue has also generated in me in assembling it. It's hard to know how to introduce ruminations such as those that follow in a way that will reduce the chances of someone speed-reading over them. Perhaps expository prose is not the optimal home for these words. Perhaps neither a printing press that churns out hundreds of copies in a matter of minutes, nor a high-tech machine that uses ones and zeros to display them on a screen nearly instantaneously, is the best way to convey them. If the medium is the message, the message here may be lost.

Most of what follows came to me while walking in the woods. At times it can seem almost futile to attempt to translate it into a form that can survive the journey from me to you. Nevertheless, here goes...

As each of us gradually awakens to mortality (everyone else's, and our own), and to the passing of all forms that we know, it is probably inevitable to ask: What matters? What has any lasting importance?

Is the present the only thing that's “real”?

Or is the past still real too? What about the future?

If past moments don't matter—don't in some way still exist—how can the present matter at all either? With the passing of some further moments, it too will be in the same category as the past.

The past two years have upended reality for many of us. What we once relied on, valued, loved, has in some cases disappeared entirely from our lives. Does that mean these elements of our lives have no enduring reality as we face this brave new world?

Is “Be Here Now” all there is? Can we be present in our current lives, while at the same time recognizing that perhaps our deepest, most meaningful experiences are in the past, and in some cases are and always will be just as present for us, at the core of our being,



as what is happening “now”?

Can we embrace that reality, and at the same time be open to further transcendent moments?

What does “now” mean anyway? When we look into deep space, we see the beginning of the universe. From that vantage point, looking back at us, we do not even exist yet. If physics is to be believed, what is “now” for us at any one point will continue to be “now,” literally forever, from some point of observation within the expanding universe. Even the beginning of time is “now.”

*Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.*

T. S. Eliot put these words to paper at some moment in 1935. The moment passed, but the words endure (in “Burnt Norton,” the first of *The Four Quartets*). Forty-five years later my mother wrote the first two lines on a page at the beginning of *T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950*, a gift to me on the day of my high school graduation.

I eventually stored the book at my parents’ house and hadn’t looked at it in years when I was inspired to take it off the shelf and open it in my parents’ living room, six weeks to the day after my mother’s death.

For the first time in decades, I encountered its long-forgotten inscription to me, and below it the date—June 20, 1980—followed by a dancing stick-figure image of my mother and those first two lines. I checked the current date, and did a double-take: June 20, 2020. Exactly 40 years after I’d graduated from high school and received this book; six weeks after my mother had graduated from the trials of physical existence, leaving a lifetime of loving and caring and inspiration behind her; and more than 55 years after T. S. Eliot’s own death—these words had come back to me. They were what I needed to comfort me in the face of what still seems like the greatest loss of someone or something I’ve cared about in my life; words shared with me 40 years ago that suddenly took on whole new dimensions of meaning. Time disappeared in that moment, in which it seemed that all of time—and all that we love within time—was, is, and will be eternally present, as T. S. Eliot had suggested (in poetry, which, rather than in prose, is where such insights belong).

If this is true, “Be Here Now” can also mean walking with our ancestors and with generations yet unborn.

The act of putting pen to paper, or finger to keyboard, is already an act of defiance of linear time. We preserve a moment for contemplation in future moments. We decide that something that is true now can also be true and have meaning in the future.

That’s the decision that every COMMUNITIES author makes, whether consciously or not. This is especially obvious in this present issue, as we feature some writing dating back as

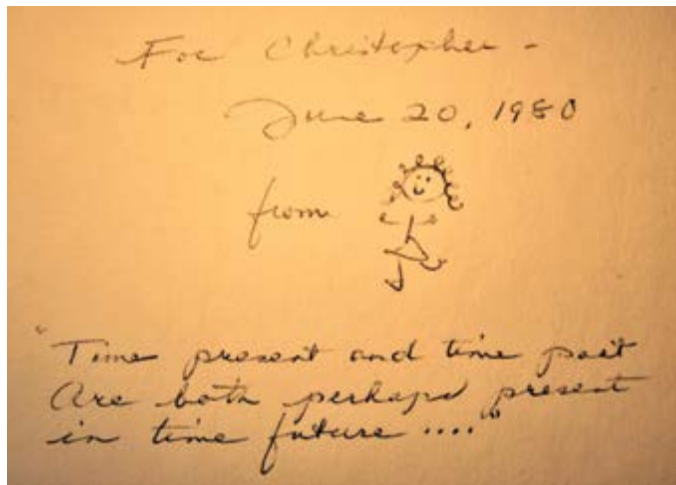
far as the late 1960s. What makes this writing any different from something written today? Are these experiences any less real than those that happened last week? Are they any less instructive? Do they offer any less insight into the human condition, our relationship to the rest of the living world, our capacities for cooperation?

I personally think not. We’re grateful to the writers who’ve granted us permission to reprint from their memoirs about late-1960s communities, whether published five decades ago or not yet published. One of them, who told me she was reminded of a partially-forgotten self in her writings from so long ago, has written an accompanying article looking to the future. We’re also reprinting an article from *Talking Leaves*, published in the late 1990s and early 2000s by Lost Valley Educational Center, my own home community. Its author, too, has evolved—seemingly more bright-eyed and bushy-tailed when penning that article back then than he is today. Yet are whatever truths it contains any less true because of that? I am hoping not.

The past offers innumerable lessons for us. The future holds just as many possibilities. The past we mourn, honor, and celebrate was once the unformed future. Our stories, shared with one another, contain keys to discovering our way forward, making sense of apparent chaos, finding ourselves in community. They always have, and always will.

We’re honored to share these stories with you. 🌱

*Chris Roth edits COMMUNITIES.*



# Water: Life in the Wilderness

By Carol Ladas Gaskin

*It has been said that human beings were invented by water as a device for transporting itself from one place to another.*

—Tom Robbins



Photos courtesy of Carol Ladas Gaskin

We began in the mid-'60s, five friends wanting to live a simple life on the land and raise our children in a loving community. At 27, I was a single woman, divorced, and had a young daughter. I was the youngest adult in the group.

We met weekly, often at Eric's place in Northern California, over the course of a year. He was a successful landscape architect and architect at 26, a single Dad with two teenage kids: Richard, 14, and Joy, 12. Joanne, 34, and Daniel, 30, were a married couple with two young children: Debra, four, and Patrick, one, and a teenage daughter from Joanne's previous marriage: Trisha, who was 12. My daughter, Dana, was six. Adair, 36, a single, kindergarten school-teacher, joined us on the land the next year.

A slightly tattered, aquamarine notebook rests on my desk today. On the cover a faded photograph of trees, golden autumn leaves, and craggy stones has peeled away in the upper right corner to show the dark glue marks on the surface. The two-ring folded clasp is rusted and slightly bent. There are no dates on the pages inside, but I know it is 55 years old. This document, a year in the making, testifies to our group vision in 1967: agreements, goals, plans, and the responsibilities each person had agreed to fulfill, all typed up and still readable on the page.

In 1968 we immigrated to British Columbia. We bought 200 acres, lived off-the-grid, built our houses from hand-hewn lodgepole pine and cedar shakes, and survived our first 40°F-below winter and six feet of snow. That first winter Eric and I dragged

an old, unused barn onto our property and put a roof on it as well.

It was November of 1969. A light snow covered the ground when my partner Eric, Dana, and I drove back up the mountain on our return from the US border. The others in the group had immigrated in 1968, but I was the last to receive my immigration status. We had to drive back across the border to Northport, so I could sign our immigration papers in the United States. Dana and I returned to BC that evening as Canadian immigrants, relieved to finally be accepted like the others.

On the way up the hill that night, I remembered our first winter when we had been blessed with six feet of snow that shrouded the lumber piles, the paths, the road, and the quarter-mile of black plastic water line. We had insulated the water line with earth and mounds of sawdust all the way down the hillside from the underground spring to the holding tank, and then down the line to the main A-frame. That year, giant flakes of whiteness fell through space for days, snow folded over everything and wrapped around the trunks of trees, rounding off the edges of roofs. All the kerosene lamps were cleaned and lit by midafternoon every day.

Light vanished behind the pines within seconds after three o'clock. Snow wedged up against the doors, blew into the out-house seats, packed inside my black, unlined rubber boots—the ones with only thin felt pads inside. The smell of frozen mittens thawing in the entryway near the stove greeted us each morning. Despite temperatures of -40°F, our water line had run freely

under that fat blanket. Powder-white, insulating flakes floated steadily out of the sky for weeks until the world outside was muted; sounds of the faraway valley silenced. We kept the water trickling all night into the sink—a calming sound all that winter.

This year we expected the same. We were prepared for the shift to the silent, pristine white landscape; a magical shift in our world—as if we suddenly lived on another planet. We had re-insulated the line with more sawdust. However, the snowfall was light, and the nights bitterly cold. Asleep in the loft above the kitchen, I woke with dread one night to the sound of silence—no dripping sound in the sink. Horror rose in my chest, a terror under my skin. Holding my breath. I whispered one word to Eric, “Water,” and we got up, dressed quickly, ran to the other A-frames calling the others until everyone was in the main house. We devised a plan. If we could drag the pipe in, hang it over the rafters and drain it, then put it back in the same day, it might save the water system. With the well-packed sawdust floor, there was no danger of ruining nice flooring.

We lit the stoves hoping the warmth of the A-frame would melt the ice we knew was in the pipe. We put the teenagers in charge of maintaining fires in the furnace and the cook stove for our return. As soon as it was light, all five of us adults marched up the quarter-mile of water line. We struggled through the tangled woods. Snow packed inside my boots within 10 minutes. Falling into the open spaces under the shrubs, with ice falling off the trees inside our coats, we reached the water box. Panting with exertion and anxiety, we unhooked the pipe. Carefully, so as not to damage it by kinking, we began pulling on it—unearthing it. An utterly mad venture. We had no way of knowing if it would work. But we had to try.

Dragging the long, black, one-inch-diameter pipe through the snow, we snaked it up the driveway and into the A-frame, then looped it over the rafters in big soft coils. Buckets stood at both ends so the melted ice could be captured for use.

The ice wouldn't melt.

We stoked the furnace higher. Panicked, I could not imagine what we would do if we failed. Water poured into the buckets. We cheered. By then, daylight was fading. Winter hours! Dark by 3:00. We ran back up with the pipe hoping it was completely empty of ice, buried it again, hooked it up to the tank, ran back down, and waited for water to pour into the sink.

Nothing.

The next morning, our hearts heavy with dread, we marched up again, pulled up the line—a little easier this time. With the furnace filled with logs and the McCleary stove heating the kitchen, the house was warm—well, warmer than the day before. We arranged the loops of pipe over the cross beams again, waited longer this time, drained the line, dragged it back up, joined the couplings, covered it with earth, old sawdust, and snow—all mixed together now. We trudged back home, exhausted, bone-weary, yet hopeful. By the time we arrived at the house, the water line had frozen again. Discouraged but determined, we tried one more time. We failed.

For the rest of that winter, we melted snow for all our household water for 12 people including Richard's friend, Peter, who had joined us. To supplement our personal supply for the house

and provide for the animals, two or three of us trekked out each morning and prepared Rowdy, our Clydesdale Percheron draught horse, to pull the sled to the spring about a mile down the road. Each morning, standing on the icy road in our rubber boots—finally we had boots with real liners—we cracked a new hole in the ice big enough for dipping the buckets, formed a water brigade, and filled three enormous barrels for the animals and an extra barrel for the house. The house barrel was placed outside the front door of the A-frame near the path with a lid on it. The icy water in it, fresh from the stream, was so cold to drink that my teeth ached. Our friend Buddy remembers being part of the water brigade on his winter visit, bundled up and willing to help after walking up our three-mile road.

Clearly, we were in it for the long haul and had begun to form a relationship with the elements and each other—one we would never forget. We cautioned the children, “Never, never, put anything ‘extra’ in the barrels. Water is sacred.”

We designated one area in the snow “Off limits” for the men to piss away from the house. Each day we gathered buckets full of what we fondly called “fat water,” fresh snowpack for melting in the big canner kettles. One canner kettle packed to the brim with snow melted down to less than a quart of water. We alternated so one person each day was in charge of providing a continuous supply.

And now 55 years later, we are still on the land. Some have left, some have died, but some remain, drawn to continue stewarding the wilderness with caring and respect for it and each other. 🐾

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*Personal names have been changed for privacy. This article is excerpted with permission from Life in the Wilderness: a memoir, not yet published. Author Carol Gaskin writes: “I have had years of experience in intentional community and have recently completed a memoir on my experience of forming and living in an intentional community in the woods of British Columbia from 1968-1986. Although the form of the community has changed, it is still alive and well 55 years later.” Now living in Seattle, Washington, Carol is a counselor, teacher, writer, and artist. See [carolladaskin.com](http://carolladaskin.com) and [seattlehakomi.com](http://seattlehakomi.com).*





# Stories from a Country Commune

By Elaine Sundancer

Illustrations © by Judith St.Soleil a.k.a. Judith Margolis

**Editor's Note:** *Celery Wine* documents Elaine Sundancer's experiences in 1969-1972 at Saddle Ridge Farm, a rural commune on 33 acres in Oregon. The excerpted book passages below, describing various slices of life from that time, may resonate even today with past and present communitarians.

*These excerpts are adapted with permission from pages 40-43, 45-48, 109-110, 155-156, and 166 of Celery Wine: The Story of a Country Commune, by Elaine Sundancer, illustrations by Judith St.Soleil, published in 1973 by Community Publications Cooperative, Yellow Springs, Ohio. The complete book is available for digital download at [ic.org/community-bookstore/product/celery-wine](http://ic.org/community-bookstore/product/celery-wine).*

For me, in those first days at the farm, the important thing, the thing that I noticed most, wasn't relationships among the people. I was feeling out something that lay beneath the surface. I felt as if I was sensing, hooking into, something that underlay personalities, and I was asking, not the people, but the piece of land, if this was a place where I could stay.

I woke up in the meadow surrounded by silence. If I woke up early enough, the dew was on the grass. I watched the first sunlight touch the mountains across the river, and then the tops of the trees along our creek, and then the ground where I lay. When the sun reached me each drop of dew sparkled like a rainbow, and suddenly I was too hot. I'd get up and pee. Maybe I'd get a drink of water from the stream. Maybe I'd do some yoga and meditate for a few minutes. Then I'd fold my clothes over my arm and walk down to the house, stopping to see how the green peas were doing, and what new flower seeds were coming up in the greenhouse.

Anne told me that the moon rises an hour later each night. When it's full it rises at about sunset, and the night after that it rises one hour after sunset, and so on, until when it's a thin crescent it's rising just before dawn. I didn't believe her. It didn't make any sense to me, why that should be so. But I was sleeping out of doors, and I was seeing the sky each night, for the first time in my life. She was right.

I had gone through high school and college with good grades. I read science fiction all through my teens. My father took me to the Hayden planetarium many times, and I watched the model of the solar system with all the moons zipping around their respective planets. I myself can demonstrate, with an electric light, an orange, and a ping-pong ball, what happens when there's an eclipse, or why the moon has phases.

So how does it happen that I didn't know the most simple plain facts about the appearance of the moon? I didn't know something that any herdsman or farmer must have known, a thousand years before Christ.

One night the moon was in Gemini, my sign. I knew that from the astrological calendar in the kitchen. It rose late, a thin crescent. I saw the dark sky full of stars as I walked up to my sleeping bag. I woke up in the middle of the night and saw that the moon had risen. Then I woke up for a moment much later in the night, and saw that it had moved up higher in the sky. It didn't look as bright now, because the time was close to dawn. I heard a rooster crow, and I fell back asleep. It was a very friendly sky that night.

Everything around me was strange. It was a new world. But I was under no pressure. I could adjust at my own pace. Anne showed me how to split kindling, and I built my first fire. I learned to cook the food we had on hand, instead of running to the store. I learned to wash clothes in an old-fashioned wringer machine, out of doors. I learned to find my way outdoors at night: at first with a kerosene lantern; later by moonlight; later still, on even the darkest nights, by the feel of the ground beneath my feet and the changing silhouette of trees and hills. I no longer lived inside a heated box, I lived out doors. I slept

in the meadow at night. I learned to be well-warmed-up, wearing dry socks, when I crawled into my sleeping bag. As winter came on I must have adjusted to the increasing cold gradually, without noticing it. Our main house was heated by two wood-burning stoves, and in the unheated corners it was chilly, but I learned that it was all right to get a bit chilly, and then go to the fire and get warm. When I went in the spring to visit my family in New York, their steam-heated apartment was too hot, and the innerspring mattress felt strange and uncomfortable.

We had no clock, no telephone, very rarely a newspaper. I learned to tell time very roughly by the sun. I learned to hang loose, to adjust to what happened as it happened—there was no way to make appointments or tie down the future. People could say, “Hey, let’s try to have supper earlier, before sundown.” They could say, “I’m hungry, when’s supper gonna be ready?” But they couldn’t say, “Supper is an hour late tonight.” We just didn’t know what time it was. There was no way to tell how much time you’d spent doing a particular job. I hadn’t realized how often, before, I ran to check the time, how often I had said, “I will allow two hours to this activity and then go on to that one,” until it was no longer possible to do those things. The days seemed long and slow and quiet, not divided into little boxes, and I moved from one activity to the next without asking myself whether I was using my time wisely.

At first I would be cooking, and discover at a crucial moment that while I stirred up the pancake batter the fire had gone out. After a while, I learned to check the fire and add wood automatically. I learned to test the oven temperature by sticking a hand in the oven. I learned to substitute home-ground whole wheat for white flour, oil for margarine, honey for sugar, and one egg (or whatever we had) for three (or whatever the recipe called for). Under these circumstances thrice-sifted flour and level-measured teaspoons began to seem unnecessary. I’d just throw in whatever I felt like, and it usually came out okay, even if the peanut butter cookies did run together sometimes and become peanut butter cake.

Cooking for seven people is not *that*

different from cooking for one city family. Some people have come here and cooked their first communal meal for 20 or 30 people. Under those circumstances, each step seems to be different than you remembered it. Your biggest frying pan is suddenly too small, and food jumps out of it while you stir. You say, “Oh yes, I’ll just wash the potatoes,” and then you stand at the sink for half an hour or more, and you realize that when you wash potatoes for 20 people there’s nothing “just” about it. I was lucky to make the change gradually.

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As the farm became a familiar place to me, as I became accustomed to life without appointments and coffee, I began to feel a new kind of energy. I began to do work, not because it had to be done, but just because I felt like doing it.

I began to do some work in the garden. Everything there was unfamiliar, and it was easy to be discouraged. I literally didn’t know the names of the plants when I saw them growing. I had eaten tomatoes all my life, but I didn’t know what a tomato plant looked like.

I helped plant potatoes. We dug a trench and mixed bloodmeal and bonemeal with the soil, to fertilize it. What I perceived was a variety of colored powders. Jonathan told me their names and what they did, and I immediately forgot them. I planted a packet of mixed flower seeds, and only two plants lived long enough to bloom. I just didn’t have any experience. I probably could have passed a true-false test in botany, but I had never watched a seed grow into a plant. I had read pamphlets on soil composition, but I had never in my life just sat and looked at a handful of soil. I blithely tramped across the moist, loose garden soil, packing it down under my boots, and my feelings were hurt when Jim yelled at me to get off. (I know now, two years later, that plant roots need loose soil, full of tiny pockets of air and water.)

I was used to being smart and competent. It was hard to find myself in the same





position as an infant. I didn't want to read any books about gardening for a while. I wanted to see what I could learn by just going slowly and keeping my eyes open; what I could learn by directly watching the plants themselves.

Gordon and Jonathan were both experienced gardeners. That was reassuring, at first. Whenever I had a question, I could go to them. Then I began to notice that their answers were always different.

Was the newly planted broccoli drooping a bit?

Jonathan: "Yes, well, it always wilts a bit at first; I wouldn't worry."

Gordon (15 minutes later): "Yeah, those plants are wilting bad; we'd better get some shade on them quick!" And he and I spent the rest of the day folding newspapers to make improvised hotcaps.

Or did I want to plant some perennials we'd just been given?

Jonathan: "Just dig a hole that's big enough for the roots. and mix some fertilizer in at the bottom of the hole. What kind? Oh, just look at the sacks in the garage, and I think there's some rabbit manure up by the compost heap; use whatever you want."

Gordon: "You want to dig a hole at least a foot and a half or two deep. Break up the clods well. This one needs some lime in the soil. This one could use some wood ashes mixed with bonemeal. This one responds well to top-dressing with manure water. Where were you planning to put that? It needs a sunny location that's well-protected from the wind. That one's a really choice plant: make sure you plant it where there's good drainage."

When the carrots failed to appear on schedule, Jonathan said cheerfully, "You have to expect some failures," and replanted the field, while Gordon muttered darkly about insufficient attention and improper watering. After a while I stopped asking questions; I already knew the style, if not the content, of their answers.

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One of the things I liked about the farm was that all the jobs I was doing were *real*. It wasn't enough to merely go through the motions, to merely follow some routine. Fire or rising bread dough or seeds obey the rules of their own nature. If you try to start a fire with damp wood it won't start. If the bread dough gets too hot the yeast dies. If the germinating seed dries out it doesn't grow. It's no use to complain that you did what the book said; the results of your actions are right in front of you.

I had been a caseworker in the Welfare Department in Baltimore, where I learned to say, "I am helping my clients," and really hurt them; where my supervisors were far

more concerned about the appropriate reports, stacked neatly in the filing cabinets, than in what was actually going on. At the farm I learned, very slowly, beginning with very simple things, what it felt like to really accomplish a piece of work. I learned to tell from the inside when I had enough energy to tackle a job with confidence; when a job was too big for me but worth trying anyway for education's sake; when a job was just outside my present range. I learned to say, "I can't do that," and not pretend that I was accomplishing something when I wasn't.

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People sometimes feel that in leaving the city we are running away from the great questions of our time. We are evading responsibility. But, for me, the city wasn't a place where I could tackle a question, sink my teeth into it, solve it. The city was so big that nothing I did there made any difference. This farm is a small space; we can experiment. We can act, and see the effects of our actions.

In the city I packed my garbage into a big metal can and a truck came and took it away. That's all I knew. Here at the farm, I know what happens to my garbage. The paper stuff gets burnt in the stone fire pit behind the woodshed. Anything organic is spread on the compost heap. The egg shells are crushed and fed back to the chickens, and the wood ashes are spread

on the garden. We take our metal, glass, and plastic trash to the dump at Darby. The kitchen waste water runs into a sump pit that I helped to dig, and the water from the washing machine runs out on the ground under the trees. What we're doing isn't perfect—I wish I knew more about soap and biodegradable detergent, I wish we were recycling metal and glass—but at least we know what's happening to our garbage, and we can change it if we want to; it's under our control.

When I lived in the city, there were days when I didn't see the sky or breathe fresh air. I spent months working at jobs where there were no windows, only artificial lighting, surrounded by the constant hum of machinery. I ate food without knowing where it grew or what it looked like while it was growing. I drank water from a metal tap, and I was afraid to drink from a stream.

My eyes I used only for reading, my hands for writing and cooking, my feet for walking (at a certain pace, on a certain surface), my voice only for talking. My body had so many possibilities that I wasn't using. Voices can scream and sing and shout and babble; legs can jump from boulder to boulder, or eat up the ground with gusto; feet can sense what sort of ground they're walking on; mouths can chew and spit and suck and swallow. It

felt to me as if my body had been taken away from me. Instead of me reaching out into the world, the world had reached into me. I say "the world," but I should say "the world we humans have created—the world of precision machinery and concrete walls." I was surrounded by machinery, and changing into a machine myself.

Here at the farm, we've grown corn and tomatoes and melons and broccoli. I know now how peculiar a brussels sprout plant looks. I know how good little yellow tomatoes taste. We've hauled manure and sawdust and spoiled hay, and made compost heaps, and fed the soil. We've planted fruit trees. We've dug a well, and designed and put in an underground system of pipes and outlets. We've built the A-frames and the sauna and the outhouse and the goatpen. We've ground flour and baked bread; we've made our own yogurt and sprouted our own bean sprouts. We've dried rose hips and wild mushrooms, basil and mint, blackberry leaves and hot peppers. We've brewed beer and ginger beer and rice wine and blackberry wine. We've made toys for our children.

I keep saying "we've" done this and that—but "we" is made up of individuals. Each person here has done some of the things on that list, no one's done even half of them. But even with the things that I could never do on my own, I hear about them, they're close to me. I heard the talk about water-bearing gravel and concrete well casings when the well was being dug. I watched while it grew inch by inch. I heard the talk about pipe fittings, and I helped dig the trench for the pipe. I know now where my water comes from.

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At the Lotus one time we did an exercise. We each held a musical instrument. The rule was, only four people to play at one time. Four people began the game: then a new person would begin playing, and someone would have to drop out. "The thing is," Daniel said, "you have to be able to play your music with your whole self behind it, and yet be ready to give it up at any time. You need to have a strong ego, and you also need to have no ego at all. Sometimes when we're performing the play you'll just be building up to a bit you're particularly proud of, and someone else will come on with something that takes your space...but it's okay. You just have to be in touch with the whole pattern." As I think of us, it seems that we're learning to do the same thing, only not just with music, but with our lives.





And meanwhile this is real life, and in the morning I come down to the main house (some days) with my nerves on edge, hoping that I can wash my face and sit quietly for a while without talking to anyone at all. I'm dreaming of an orchestra that plays together, without scores, without rehearsals, inventing its own music as it goes along; and I'm living in the midst of an orchestra tuning up, each person most attentive to his or her own instrument, producing screeches and squawks in the process; and every once in a while, coming together for a bar or two. Mike and Joan and Will and Claudia have a tense discussion about spending food stamps on honey or sugar, margarine or butter; I sardonically watch the couples taking sides. I go out to ask Jim if it's okay to plant the New Zealand spinach in the melon patch, and when I get out to the breakfast table I discover that for some reason I'm scared stiff to talk to him this morning. Mary says, "Oh, Elaine, last summer when I visited here I was so scared of you; you were working so hard at canning and you seemed to know everything." Me: "Good grief. I don't know how to relate to people. When I say 'good morning' in the morning I go away afterwards and think, 'maybe I didn't say that right, maybe there was something peculiar about the way I said that,' so naturally I spend a lot of time out at the canning stove." Riding home from picking blackberries, in the back of the pickup truck, I look up at Mary's sharp, delicate-boned face, her hair blown back by the wind. Her eyes meet mine and we smile. I look across the truck at Joan Crescent, who's only been here for a couple of weeks, and for the first time her face comes into focus for me, and I see how placid and gentle it is, with a hint of dowager-aunt behind the smile.

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When I first came out to the country I felt as if I was moving out into a new space, a new territory, a space of our own, a protected space where it was safe to make new discoveries. The farm felt really good to me. I was moving in a new direction, and I thought I could keep on the move forever. But now I see, sadly, how much we are still a part of the world we left behind. The kerosene in our lamps is distilled by Standard Oil. There is coffee in the coffee pot, and sometimes bananas on the kitchen

shelf. I don't want to be exploiting other people on this planet, but it seems as if there's no way I can stop it. Other people are hungry, and we have too much food; even though I stop overeating and become a food producer myself that doesn't move any surplus food to the people who need it, and I don't know what to do.

When I get in this mood Mike says, "We don't have to be perfect. What matters is the direction we're moving in." About our direction there is no question. By and large, we've dropped out of the gross national product. We are building the fertility of a small piece of land, and we'll know how to build the fertility of a larger piece of land, if we ever get a chance. What happens next, where we go on from here, I don't know. Five years ago, I couldn't even imagine that I'd ever be here.

When I lived in the city, I talked about world problems, and I felt guilty; I earned money which I spent on luxuries so I could stand to live in the city, but I never *did* anything, because what could I do? The whole earth is one interconnected process. I'll begin by doing the jobs that are simplest and clearest and closest to me. Maybe that will in time also help the people on the other side of the planet.

We've certainly made mistakes in this



new life of ours. We've abandoned a lot of the traditional knowledge our parents handed down to us, because the useful part was so entangled with complete nonsense that you couldn't trust it. And a lot of the information we discarded turns out to be perfectly true. "Wash your hands before meals; take a shower every day; change your sheets every week and use deodorant on your armpits." We ignored all that, and we've had episodes of crab lice and pinworms and staph.

I read in a book by Scott Nearing that you should cut your firewood well ahead of time, and let it dry. He said you get more heat per cord of wood that way. We didn't do that, and for the past two months our firewood has been so damp that we have to dry it out in the oven before we put it on the fire. Every so often someone says, "Hey, do I smell something burning?" and someone else who's in the kitchen will remove a stick of dry wood that's begun to char. It's okay, we can handle it, no need to panic. "But," says Dale, as he blows on a fire that's three-quarters dead, "next year, Elaine, you're going to see a woodshed full of dry wood in September."

We've made mistakes, and that's okay. If now I do wash my hands more carefully, or cut firewood ahead of time, it will be because I really want to do it, because

I know the reason why, not because some nagging voice outside myself told me to.

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There was a time when I had a—a vision, I guess I have to call it, but it wasn't something I saw with my eyes, it was something I felt in my body. It happened while I was still working in the city, dancing in a beer place.

I felt as if I were dancing with a great many people, some near, others in the far distance. Eyes looking ahead, spine straight, arms stretching to the sides, or lifted in wonder, palms open. I could hear the breathing of those near to me. Sometimes our fingers almost touched. No one looked aside, or looked at anyone else to see what they were doing. But we were all following the same music, and our movements made a pattern together. My barefoot feet touched the grass. The sun shone behind me. Dancing outward from the light; dancing outward, from the base of the spine.

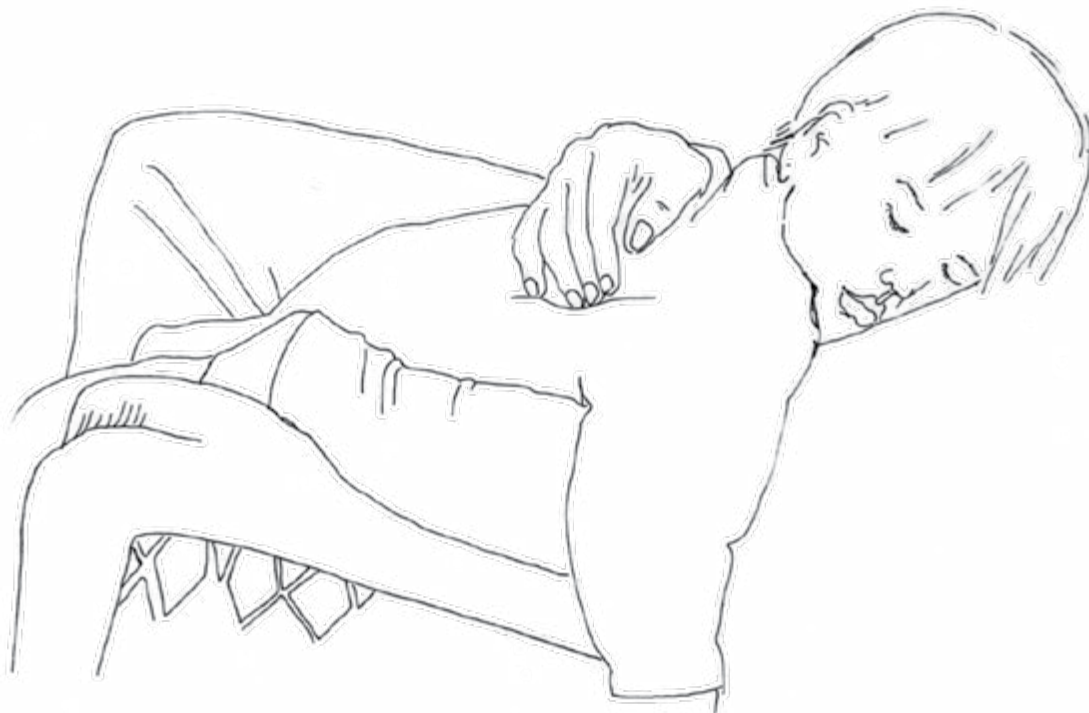
It was only a feeling I had. Myself, still in the city, alone, starting in faith to dance a pattern that can only come to full beauty if others, also alone, are dancing it too.

I feel shy, as these words leave my hand. I know they will be touched by a typewriter and a printing press, before this book is put together. If I could, I would have them only copied from hand to hand, until they reached your eyes. 🌿

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*Elaine Sundancer lives in a medium-sized city. She grows food every month of the year in her sunny backyard. In June 2022, she will be 80 years old.*

*Jerusalem-based artist/essayist Judith Margolis (a.k.a. Judith St. Soleil) is the art editor of Nashim, a Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues (U. of Indiana Press) and creative director of Bright Idea Books, where she publishes fine, limited edition artist's books. Her book, Life Support Invitation to Prayer was published for the Penn State Press Graphic Medicine series (2019). Her book Train Music Writing and Pictures, with poet CS Giscombe, was published by Omnidawn Publishing/Oakland (2020). Her drawings appeared in Country Commune Cooking by Lucy Horton, published by Coward McCann & Geoghegan in 1972 and republished by American History Press in 2019. Some of her work can be viewed at [www.judithmargolis.com](http://www.judithmargolis.com) and [www.brightideabooks.com](http://www.brightideabooks.com).*



# Celery Wine: Moving Forward

By Elaine Sundancer

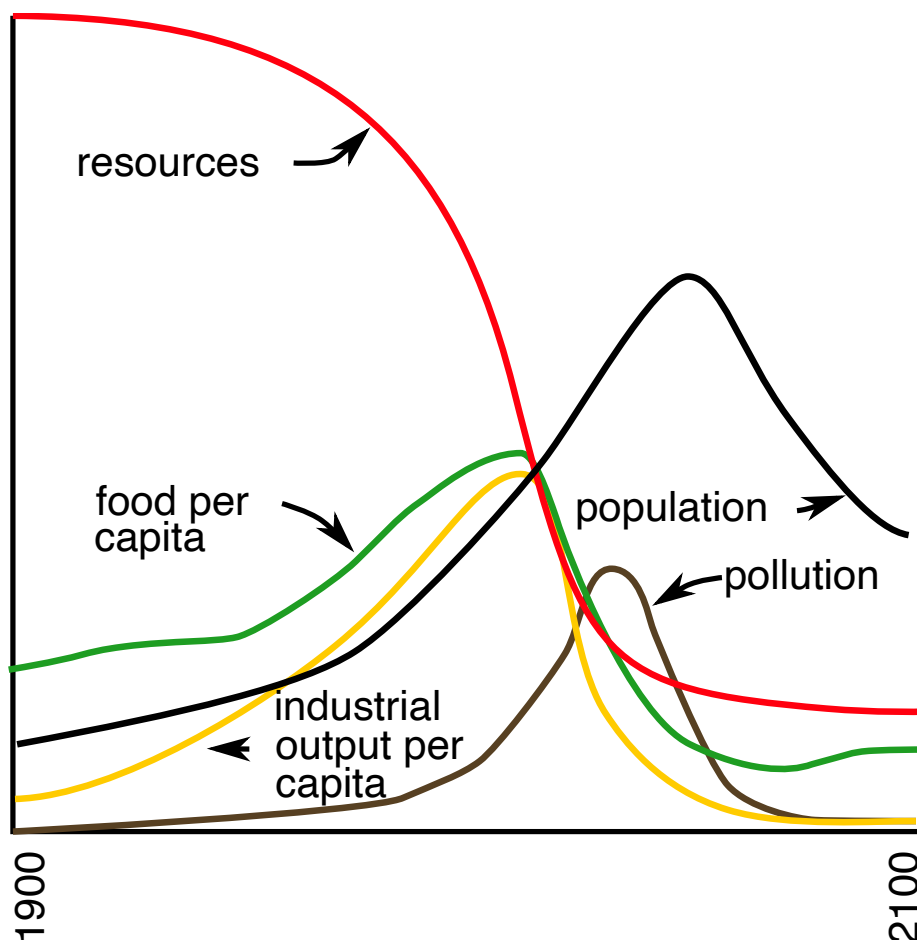
I moved to Saddle Ridge Farm in 1969 and lived there for 14 years. After that my life went in different directions, but some of the same people still live there, others have joined, and there are many people living “back-to-the-land” lifestyles in the area. In 2018 people traveled long distances to join together for our 50th Anniversary Reunion.

What were we reading, during those early years? I remember *Five Acres and Independence* and similar practical books about country skills. We had never heard of a carbon footprint. We had never heard of climate change. *Limits to Growth* was published in 1972 but I got my first look at it around 1985 or 1990.

I look back now and think, how smart we were! We were exploring a way of life that made so much sense. How much better things would be today if more people had moved in similar directions.

Now the *Limits to Growth* report sits on my bookshelf, and it tells me that we should expect and prepare for difficult times over the next couple of decades.

*Limits to Growth* is a report based on repeated computer simulations showing possible interactions between the earth and human systems, including natural resources, industrial output, food, pollution, and population. Updates were published in 1992 and 2004. Generally speaking the report’s predictions correspond to our experienced reality. We reached peak conventional oil production in 2005. Major oil fields are in decline, and global oil production (including fracking) probably hit its peak in 2018.



Limits-to-growth-figure-35 - By YaguraStation - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0; commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=92084922

The future ahead of us will be marked by declines in available resources and in industrial production. (We tend to think first about declines in fossil fuels, but we rely on many other essential natural resources, such as phosphates for fertilizer and lithium for batteries.) At some point the population of the planet will start to decline.

As I write this in December 2021, I read newspaper headlines about supply shortages, computer chip shortages, inflation. We see gaps on the grocery store shelves; cargo ships are lined up waiting for a chance to unload. The media says it’s related to new trading patterns due to Covid—it is just a temporary problem.

I don’t see it that way.

In our global economy everything is interconnected. We have a just-in-time economic system, in which goods are manufactured where labor is cheapest and shipped around the world using oil.

This system is designed to produce masses of goods as cheaply as possible. A small problem at any point can lead to larger problems at other points. We depend on a fragile system without any resilience, and now that system is breaking down at the weak points.

It seems to me our current shortages are one step in a continuing process. Lots of things we’re used to will gradually become less available. These large-scale social changes don’t go in a straight line. They go in cycles, up and down; they vary from place to place. In this case, we’re looking at quite a few different processes and we have no idea how they will all interact. But generally speaking, the long-term trend for our industrial civilization is decline.

I first learned about this in 2009 when I came across some essays by John Michael Greer, and took them with me on vacation. Greer wrote a blog called *The Archdruid Report* from 2006 to 2017, with an essay every week and usually a couple of hundred interesting responses. Much of this material is available in a se-



Illustrations © by Judith St.Soleil a.k.a. Judith Margolis

ries of books, and the entire blog is available at [archdruidmirror.blogspot.com](http://archdruidmirror.blogspot.com) and [thearchdruidreport-archive.200605.xyz](http://thearchdruidreport-archive.200605.xyz). I just dipped into some essays from 2011, and they are definitely still worth reading, full of valuable details.

To summarize his viewpoint, let's take a quote from November 30, 2011, when he refers to "the rising spiral of crises taking shape around us right now.... [We face] the hard fact that we've exhausted most of the easily extracted, highly concentrated energy sources on this planet and are going to have to downscale our expectations and our collective sense of entitlement to fit within the narrower and more burdensome limits that dependence on renewable energy sources will impose on us."

Nowadays we hear that expected scientific breakthroughs will solve these problems and let us keep on doing everything we're used to. Our newspapers and TV channels are filled with stories about the digital future ahead of us, with 5G, and artificial intelligence, and robots working on assembly lines. Cars will run on carbon-free electricity. We'll rebuild the electric transmission system. Perhaps we'll build improved, safer nuclear power plants. Perhaps hydrogen fusion will offer infinite low-cost power.

These things aren't going to happen.

Since they are already in process, some

of them will happen, in smaller forms, in some localities, for a while. But all these projects compete for the same limited supply of fossil fuels. The fantasy of a green economy, just like today but with electric-powered cars, isn't going to happen because our pockets are empty.

Picture someone who was born to great wealth, who's always had money in their pockets. It's hard for that person to realize that the money has run out. They keep putting their hand to their pocket, expecting money to be there.

For the past 200 years we've used coal and oil as our main sources of energy, coal and oil containing energy based on the stored sunlight of millions of years. Now we have to adjust our minds, our expectations, to the reality that we don't have enough fossil fuels to do everything on our wish list (and that burning more fossil fuels increases climate risk).

### Real Life vs. Bureaucratic Life

One thing I love about gardening is the way we get feedback from the real world.

Seeds need water to grow. If you forget to water them one day, and the weather is mild, they're probably okay. But if you forget to water them for two days, or three days...once they dry out completely, you've lost them, they won't come up. When my fuchsias start looking yellowish around the inner growing points, that means the plants could use more nitrogen. As gardeners we're involved in a real-world process, with time, soil, fertilizer, weather all affecting our results.

A few months ago I read Michael Lewis' latest book, *The Premonition: A Pandemic Story*. He describes a few remarkable people in the world of public health who have a practical grasp of coping with the realities of healthcare, who care most about making a difference on the ground. (They're the sort of people who would notice if their seeds don't come up.)

He also describes a much larger layer of people within health-related organizations who know how to push pieces of paper around but don't have a vivid sense of connecting to the real world. They have rules to follow, forms to fill out, and in ordinary times they fill their role well enough. When times are not ordinary, when the times require a fresh response to the facts on the ground—well these folks have good intentions but that's not really their skill set.

I was surprised and discouraged to grasp that large bureaucratic organizations deal



with reality slowly and not very effectively. Once I realized this, I started noticing it at other levels of our culture also.

We now face declining fossil fuel and other resources, plus climate change. It doesn't look to me as if the government or other large bureaucratic organizations are going to speak honestly about these problems or do much to solve them. I wonder what we at the grassroots can do. I wonder what private donors and crazy enthusiastic dedicated 20-year-olds can do. Let's find out.

### Useful Things We Can Do

Each issue of COMMUNITIES reports on people taking innovative steps to enrich our lives now and to prepare for challenging times ahead. At the same time, I suspect few of us are ready for the level of change we're likely to experience over the next 20 years.

Some people don't want to think about any of this. That's a reasonable position to take. When I first started absorbing this new information, back in 2009, it was a shock! I limited how much I'd read each day, and never at bedtime because I needed to sleep, I had to keep functioning.

Many of us are already working at full capacity, holding down a job, caring for young children, developing new acreage, coping with Covid. Take on as much as you can handle. Cope each day with that day's problems. Take good care of yourself.

However, if you have some extra margin in your life, if you're thinking about the big picture and asking yourself *how do I fit in?*, if you're ready to learn some new skills over the next couple of years, or if you just want increased home-based security for yourself and your friends, I have suggestions for you.

### Growing and Preserving Food

Most of the people reading COMMUNITIES already have skills in growing and preserving food. If not, many resources are

available. Here are a few valuable websites to add to your list:

- [www.seedambassadors.org/the-big-willamette-winter-gardening-chart](http://www.seedambassadors.org/the-big-willamette-winter-gardening-chart)
- [www.seedambassadors.org/seed-saving-guide](http://www.seedambassadors.org/seed-saving-guide)
- [www.adaptiveseeds.com](http://www.adaptiveseeds.com)
- [luterra.com](http://luterra.com)
- [luterra.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Seed\\_Cleaning\\_Strategies.pdf](http://luterra.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Seed_Cleaning_Strategies.pdf)

I own gardening tools made by Lowell Cordas of Lacey, Washington. They're made from stainless steel; they can be re-sharpened; they will last a lifetime. He used to offer workshops on tool sharpening at local conferences. I intended to include him in this list, but when I called today to check his contact information, I learned he has retired. What a pity! Isn't there someone who could apprentice to Lowell and maintain these valuable skills?

### Home-Based Healthcare

It might be a good idea to expand our personal knowledge on how to cope with health problems. Take a first aid course. Think about medical supplies you'd like to have available at home. (Do you have a pulse oximeter? It's an inexpensive gadget that measures oxygen in your blood. If you have Covid, this device tells you when you need to seek additional help. See [www.uofmhealth.org/health-library/acl4222](http://www.uofmhealth.org/health-library/acl4222) for more details.)

We can grow useful botanical medicines in a backyard or larger space. Rugosa roses have large rosehips, very high in vitamin C, but they are such large plants they're most suitable for people who have several acres of land. I'm growing Frau Dagmar Hasstrup, a rugosa rose which has been bred to maintain a more reasonable size, six feet high or so.

Also visit [strictlymedicalseeds.com](http://strictlymedicalseeds.com) for seeds, plants, tincture press, and other useful tools.

The American Botanical Council, [www.herbalgram.org](http://www.herbalgram.org), is a reliable source for information about botanical medicines. Also see many resources available at the American Herbalists Guild, [www.americanherbalistsguild.com](http://www.americanherbalistsguild.com).

I rely on a naturopathic physician for a substantial portion of my personal healthcare. Currently 22 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands have licensing or registration laws for naturopathic doctors. These physicians have four years of post-college training and pass the Naturopathic Physicians Licensing Exam. Unfortunately if there are no regulations in the state, then anyone can call themselves a "naturopathic doctor," so check licensure in your state: [naturopathic.org/page/RegulatedStates#](http://naturopathic.org/page/RegulatedStates#).

Visit [hesperian.org](http://hesperian.org) for updated versions of *Where There is No Doctor* and similar books (*Where There Is No Dentist*, *Where Women Have No Doctor*, *Workers' Guide to Health and Safety*, *A Book for Midwives*, *A Community Guide to Environmental Health*, and more) in several languages ([store.hesperian.org/ctgy/all\\_products.html](http://store.hesperian.org/ctgy/all_products.html)).

### Information Storage and Planning for Emergencies

At present almost all of us have lots of information stored on

our cell phones. Just in case that system stopped working, what essential information would you need? Print it out on paper. Store it where you can find it in an emergency.

While you're thinking about this, you might make a plan for communication with your family and closest friends. Suppose there were a mudslide or a tornado; suppose you were separated; how would you get in touch?

In my neighborhood, we have volunteers learning to use simple handheld radios which cover two to three miles. We check in and practice using them once a month. Using these radios we can reach out to a network of volunteer ham radio operators. In an emergency, if cell phones weren't working we could still communicate throughout the city.

Many local emergency services departments offer "Community Emergency Response Team" (CERT) training. When I did this training it meant eight evening meetings, two hours each, including speakers plus practical training. The subjects include first aid, search and rescue, supplies to keep on hand, and other useful topics. Nowadays, some localities are offering online training, or training that's partly online, partly face-to-face.

If training is not available in your area you could go to the CERT website, [www.ready.gov/cert](http://www.ready.gov/cert), and download participant manuals, instructor manuals, videos, and slides for your own do-it-yourself course.

CERT training is designed for people who may have to cope with natural disasters such as tornadoes, earthquakes, or wildfires. It seems to me that in the coming years it might be useful for many other situations as well.

## Repairing Equipment, Preserving Skills

If you buy household equipment today, it has sophisticated

computer chips so you can automatically select three different wash cycles, or choose among seven different temperatures. Of course if the chip fails then you have a problem. One of the local secondhand stores figured out how to take that washing machine and put old-fashioned knobs on it so it still works after the computer chip has died. That seems like a really useful thing to do.

Also consider ways of preserving computer equipment into the future. You can take an outdated computer, too small to run the latest version of Windows, install a suitable version of Linux, and have a functioning computer.

It's useful to think about saving and restoring all sorts of equipment, and here the list could expand infinitely. Would it be possible to find and restore manual typewriters? (That would be a complicated job!) I'm sure people are already storing old-fashioned foot-driven sewing machines. There are sailing enthusiasts who maintain the skills needed for wind-propelled ships. How about bicycles 50 years from now? Horse-drawn carriages? Here's a page showing the different vehicles used in Jane Austen's time: [jasna.org/publications-2/persuasions-online/volume-40-no-1/ewing](http://jasna.org/publications-2/persuasions-online/volume-40-no-1/ewing). Does anyone still know how to build and maintain these vehicles, and how/why they were designed like that?

Take a moment to think about the things you enjoy and use today. Will your grandchildren still be able to enjoy those things? What can we do now so that knowledge and tools and skills survive into the future?

Obviously, no one person could become an herbalist and a washing machine expert and a carriage maker. But many of us could choose one area, something that appeals to us, where we can learn the best of today's knowledge and combine it with older methods, so we can transmit that body of skills and knowledge into the future.





## Take a Second Look at Older Technologies

John Michael Greer has written many books worth reading, but I only have room enough to mention two of them. *Retrotopia*, a novel, is set in a future country, the Lakeland Republic, which chooses to rely on older technologies. Each county votes whether to have 1950s technology (electricity and paved roads) or earlier technologies back to the 1830s (dirt roads, much lower taxes). “If you make every technology cover all its own costs, things sort themselves out quickly,” one character says. “Everything I saw around me...had been quarried out of the past and refitted for use in the present because each one of them worked better than the alternatives,” says the narrator.

*The Retro Future* offers a series of essays focusing on past technologies that would be especially useful in a world based largely on power from the sun, wind, and muscle. “Over and over again, technologies in common use during the peak years of the civilization have been lost during the dark age that followed,” Greer writes. “A relatively small number of people can preserve the technology, furthermore, by the simple acts of learning it, practicing it, and passing it on to the next generation.”

He describes seven technologies as his top candidates for use and preservation over the coming years. I bet you’re already doing some of them, while there are others you haven’t thought about. They are organic intensive gardening, solar thermal technologies, sustainable wood heating (includes coppicing), sustainable healthcare, letterpress printing, low-tech shortwave radio, and computer-free mathematics.

Greer also discusses unused technologies that at some point will be ready for revival. For example, a solar-powered steam engine was displayed in Paris in 1878, and a solar/steam printing press in 1880. These innovations were sidetracked when coal and oil became dominant energy sources, but perhaps it will soon be time to try them again.

Both books are valuable resources to help us think about which technologies we might want to preserve or reuse over the next 20 years, 50 years, and beyond. (Also see [greenwizards.com](http://greenwizards.com))

## Preserving Online Resources—How I Hope This is Possible!

Up to this point, everything I’ve listed is a natural expansion of things we’re already doing. If you’re in your 20s, there are things you might want to study now so you’ll

have skills that will be in high demand over the next 50 years. For those of us who are middle-aged, these are the skills and resources we need to keep our lives steady going forward.

But the question closest to my heart is, out of all the resources I have now at my fingertips, what will still be available 100 years in the future?

At this moment I can visit the Getty website and download detailed images from 15th century illuminated manuscripts. (Go to [www.getty.edu/art/manuscripts](http://www.getty.edu/art/manuscripts) and type in a search term.) I can listen to Mozart played on the instruments of his time. I can listen to a 1977 concert by the Grateful Dead.

100 years from now the internet in its current form will not exist. It takes a LOT of electricity to support the internet. Is there any way libraries of electronic media could be preserved for the future? Do we have DVD discs that will last 100 years? And some way to play them? The Romans built dams and aqueducts that are still in use. I hope someone is thinking about this.

## Dharma—Useful Tool in Hard Times

I’ve been studying Tibetan Buddhism since 1987. The next two decades are likely to be difficult; I’ve found Dharma to be a useful tool in hard times. I’ll take a few paragraphs now to share the best things I’ve learned, tools that may be useful for some people who’re reading this. I’m not a qualified teacher. This is sloppy Buddhism. It’s just my two cents.

My experience is that invisible help is available. There are invisible sources of wisdom and compassion. If we want our own wisdom and compassion to grow, we can ask for help.

I often say “Buddhas and bodhisattvas help me now!” “May I stay balanced and steady; may I be flexible and patient!” Those invocations work for me because I’ve been studying this stuff since 1987. I understand that the Buddhas and bodhisattvas represent certain qualities of mind. I’ve heard many stories about the teachers who wrote certain texts, and I invoke their help. I’ve been doing this for so long it feels natural to me.

But it might not feel natural to you,

so one question to start with is, who or what embodies wisdom and compassion for you? It might be the Dalai Lama or another teacher you've seen on the internet. It might be someone you remember from childhood. It might be a cloud of glowing white light. Whatever image feels most natural to you, consider taking some time to visualize that image and invite wisdom, compassion, and health to enter your mind/body.

Buddhism starts with taking refuge. We take refuge in the essence of wisdom and compassion. Our minds have an innate clarity, but most of the time we're so busy thinking and worrying we never notice it. We need to get to our next appointment in time; we need to complete work on time; we need to interact appropriately with the people around us. It's time to eat a little snack. Think think think/worry worry.

So now we take some time to sit still, spine straight. We notice our breath. When the mind goes off on other thoughts, we notice that, and go back to watching the breath. There is nothing mind will not think! Over time, we make friends with our mind. Over time, thoughts settle. At some moments, we experience clarity and spaciousness within our own minds. Our thoughts and worries and emotions coexist with spacious awareness.

I used to be extremely emotional. Over time, doing these practices, thoughts and emotions become less important. They are still present, but they don't take you over in the same way. From Buddhism, I learned to constantly reset my state of being. To remember that here I am now, and not spend too much time regretting or praising what happened in the past.

I like the way Buddhism recognizes impermanence. I remember one discussion group when we were invited to think about all the ways impermanence manifests in our lives. You know those times when you go out to start the car and it doesn't start? Impermanence strikes again! Nowadays, if the car doesn't start, I'm prepared for it; I take it in stride. Having trained myself in the everyday experience of impermanence, I hope I'm more prepared for whatever forms impermanence will take in the next 20 years.

The most important tool I've learned from Tibetan Buddhism is called the Three Noble Principles: Good in the Beginning, Good in the Middle, Good in the End.

If we apply these principles to morning practice, then at the beginning we might say, "May this practice benefit myself and also all sentient beings." As you do the practice, you do it with a light touch; you don't make a big deal of it. At the end, you think again, "May this practice benefit all sentient beings." We can apply the Three Noble Principles to a session of practice, or to any activity. When you arrive at/leave the office. At the start and end of the day. At the beginning/end of a particular project.

Recently I read an unusual book by Mingyur Rinpoche, *In Love with the World: a Monk's Journey through the Bardos*. He was the head of Tergar Monastery in Bodh Gaya, and he wanted to embark on a wandering retreat. In 2011, after preparing an archive of monthly teachings for his students, he left the monastery in the middle of the night, leaving a letter for his assistants, students, and family.

All his life he'd been trained to be a Buddhist teacher. He was always accompanied by an attendant who looked after him. The first steps on his journey were difficult. Sitting in a crowded train car, "in the midst of this bad dream, every cell in me seemed to protest my surroundings," he writes. "My entire body felt racked by tension. I engaged in a body scan...brought my attention to the top of my head and worked down very slowly." We know about his experiences because after four years of wandering retreat he came back, wrote a book about his travels, and resumed teaching students worldwide.

I've read many books by the recent generation of Tibetan Buddhist teachers, but I can't think of another book like this one. Mingyur Rinpoche is so frank about his own emotions, his own weaknesses and challenges. When he finds himself in trouble he turns to a body scan, such a basic practice. It's rare for a Dharma teacher to talk about their own human experiences, but for those of us in the West, this personal teaching communicates so clearly!

When I first started studying Buddhism there were only a few books available. Now they fill shelves in every library and bookstore. You'll find teachings from many Buddhist masters on YouTube. In addition, you might look at [prajnaonline.org](http://prajnaonline.org), which offers a selection of recent teachings from many Tibetan masters. Just type a word like meditation or compassion or mind or death into the search box, and review the suggested videos.

Mingyur Rinpoche wrote a letter to his students before leaving on his wandering retreat. The advice he gave them is good advice for us now, as we prepare to meet the challenges of the difficult years ahead. He said:

"[This] is the key point of the entire path, so it bears repeating: All that we are looking for in life—all the happiness, contentment, and peace of mind—is right here in the present moment.... Wherever you are and whatever you are doing, pause from time to time and relax your mind. You don't have to change anything about your experience. You can let thoughts and feelings come and go freely, and leave your senses wide open. Make friends with your experience and see if you can notice the spacious awareness that is with you all the time." 🌸

May it be so!  
Best wishes,  
Elaine

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*Elaine Sundancer lives in a medium-sized city. She grows food every month of the year in her sunny backyard. In June 2022, she will be 80 years old.*

# Remembering Tree Frog Farm

By Catherine Blinder



Photos courtesy of Catherine Blinder

*Adapted from an article, “Thirty Years Later, A Commune Mom Asks the Kids,” which appeared in the Hartford Courant on April 4, 2004; see [www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-xpm-2004-04-04-0404040010-story.html](http://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-xpm-2004-04-04-0404040010-story.html).*

It wasn't an “experiment.” I inhaled. But I also cut and baled hay, canned and stored the food we grew in the enormous gardens, mucked the barn, fed and milked the cow and goats, made butter from the cow's milk, grabbed eggs from under the bellies of the smelly chickens, ground wheat berries and transformed them into leaden loaves of bread, healed sick children with herbs, sewed clothing and curtains, embroidered and knitted, drove a tractor and a double-clutch pickup truck, gathered and boiled watery maple sap into a rich dark substance we used in and on everything for the rest of the year, birthed livestock and buried them tearfully when they died of illness, chased raccoons, possums, skunks, and feral dogs away from the henhouse and goats, cooked for dozens, downed and cut trees into firewood and then fed the big stove in the kitchen until it burned red and then settled for the night—you get the picture. Nobody works that hard as an experiment.

Some of us were running from a family, others were running toward one. Some were actually experimenting—and those who were tended to remain childless during those years, possibly viewing procreation as an ultimately irrevocable commitment to that particular moment; and those were often the folks who moved successfully into middle age wearing their time at “the hippie commune” as though it were the quintessential honor badge of alternativity and a titillating bon mot to toss casually out for the amusement of friends over cocktails, at dinner parties, and from the choice seats at concerts of aging rockers.

I was just running. In the winter of 1970, I moved from Aspen, Colorado to Tree Frog Farm in Guilford in southern Vermont. (Tree Frog Farm, Total Loss Farm, and Johnson's Pastures were among the communes established in the late '60s in a hilltop neighborhood known as Packer Corners.) I remember following barely plowed double ruts up the dirt road in the noisy cold of a VW bus, my baby girl asleep in my lap, everything I owned in two duffel bags, with a man I barely knew driving me into his life. The hippie version of a mail-order bride.

I had yet to appreciate the beauty of the place—the trees were bare, the landscape tangled with low matted brush and the short spears of beaver-chewed stumps, the sky an unnaturally dark warning gray.

In Colorado the winter sun often shone on powder snow; here I was to learn that when the sun opened on the snow, you dropped everything and went out into it, inviting it to

blind you, lifting your face to soak up the weak warmth, searching for the toboggan.

## Don't Start the Revolution Without Me

It would be both foolish and arrogant to say that the years between 1966 and 1980 defined this country any more dramatically than other political and cultural shifts.

Throughout history there have been organized responses to troubled times; for every war we have fought, there has been resistance; masses protested when machinery began to threaten the primacy and value of human labor. In times of religious oppression, there have always been pockets of idealists looking to create utopian communities—the Shakers, Oneida, Amana, the Bruderhof. During the Depression, extended families and more lived in one house, where those with means helped to support those without.

However, those particular years, between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, were emblematic of a broad cultural shift, of the social structure itself challenged, turned, and twisted until it finally, a generation later, became its metamorphosized self. (My daughter's favorite commercial example is, “Chai! My mom was making chai on a wood stove 30 years before Starbucks was calling it ‘chai tea latte.’”)

When I took that trip up the dirt road toward the farm, I joined a tribe of hardy,



unnaturally idealistic young men and women who felt the country, our country, was in a state of siege. And we, nearly all of us already veterans of anti-war activity and aggressive protest, felt that by replacing anger with hope and tempering isolation with collective strength, we could be part of a larger movement that—although it could not calm the ominous rumblings of war and struggle, and indeed we didn't want it to—could offer a radical alternative to an increasingly factious and marginalized existence. By going “back to the land” we would not be bound by the strictures of society. We existed largely beyond the edges, beyond the rules.

It felt powerful. There were communal farms and urban collective households all over the country. We had our own newspapers, rules, rituals, and a version of the underground railroad. We were creating an alternative life, and many of us genuinely believed we could make a difference, that we could stop the war and work for social justice while practicing guerrilla farming and modeling a collective existence.

It proved to be an arduous and elusive task.

### Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

Why did we think it would make any difference, the way we raised our children? Did we think we were doing them a favor by speaking candidly with them about sex and drugs and politics? Did we think raising them to ignore common gender definitions would make their lives more fluid? Did we believe that by making music, the natural world, and hard work part of their daily child lives we could guarantee them that life as an adult would be more rewarding? Did it matter, really, if we consciously exposed them to difference, and asked them to see no difference?

You never knew who would show up for dinner—farmers, Japanese and Franciscan

monks, musicians, naked people, armed people, famous people, circus people, Indian gurus, shamens, the FBI in cheap dark suits and people on the run from them. Did we believe these dinner guests would help engender more tolerant offspring? It certainly made for more lively meals.

### It Takes a Commune

Say the choice to live communally, agriculturally, and as self-sufficiently as possible was just another form of political resistance; one might ask, what was it that we were resisting? Long before the mainstream culture started questioning the structure and definition of family, the role of women and the assumptions that surrounded child rearing, we chose to struggle with those presumptions daily. We felt it our duty, and relished the opportunity. We were defining our lives as we lived them. In terms of parenting, there wasn't so much a rejection or an abdication of traditional authority as there was a fundamental trust in luck and instinct.

Questioning the assumptive role of women was a bit more challenging. As one child who grew up on the commune recently observed, “In general I would say that it was the women of the farm that held it together, while the men, though often harvesting, repairing, planting, concentrated more on the political side of things.”

That was true in the larger political struggle as well. I remember being at a Students for a Democratic Society meeting in Boulder in 1967, and when the meeting was over, we women were told, not asked, to clean up the coffee we had made earlier, and start mimeographing (what we did before Kinko's existed) the flyers for the march the next day while they lit one another's Lucky Strikes and whispered strategy. Real social progress has had, at best, a somewhat desultory delivery system.

### Sexual Politics

It was 1971, and the other three women in the house and I were braving the subzero weather to drive into Brattleboro to attend our first “consciousness raising” group. We had already cooked, cleaned, and put Michelle to bed. I was pregnant with Amos. The last thing we heard from one of the half dozen men, lobbed like a flaccid balloon landing far short of its mark, was, “Well, I guess this separates the girls from the women.”

We opened the kitchen door to the weather and hefted our wool-laden bodies up into the truck. We drove down the road, silent in the cold, until we got to the apple tree where the dirt became pavement. “Well,” said one of us, “I guess that settles any question we might have had.” Righteous laughter kept us warm all the way to the second floor of the natural foods restaurant where the meeting was held.

Watch out boys...the girls are coming back armed.

As Amos now puts it: “I am a straight man raised almost entirely by women of the feminist generation. There's no question—I have always seen women as my equals.”

### Making it Work

Living on a farm in a place with real seasons, one of them being a winter that holds the edges of six months in its grip, was not easy. It was often quite hard. The outside money didn't always stretch as far as it needed to, and the idea of collective finances varied in its actual application.



When I asked children of the commune recently if they remember feeling poor, everyone had a story. One told me, “We grew up so poor that it was kind of like being a first-generation immigrant’s child, and I’m thankful for that. [Later,] I was proud to walk into the bank and pay off commercial loans for a bulldozer and sawmill.”

My memory is that indeed, it was often very difficult financially. But if the car or tractor broke down there was always someone around to fix it, even if it took them a week to learn how to do it first. When the cow needed to be bred, the vet would take the plunge in our barn and bring home a gallon of goat milk and some canned goods for it. If the septic system needed pumping, the sweet man with the too-small cowboy hat and the truck with “We’re #1 in the Business of #2” painted on the side was willing to wait for the full payment if things were tight. The plumber would take marijuana, which grew quite prolifically up there in zone 5. The bank once forgave us December’s mortgage payment as a “Christmas gift.” In that way, we were like everyone else in a town where farming and resources were dehydrating faster than the pressed peaches stretched on the screen above the stove. In small communities, need outweighs difference every time.

We bartered, we begged, and we did without. Going “back to the land” was a gamble on several fronts, not the least of which was that no one actually came equipped with the skills necessary to make a farm work. But we learned. And we learned—when you’re alone in the barn milking a several-hundred-pound cow with your shoulder pressing a flank and she suddenly kicks and moves that bulk your way—you’re glad someone told you how to move out of the way and not to worry about the spilling milk.

Every farm had a patron saint, a local who saw us as part of the continuum of the land at a time when their own children showed little or no interest in staying on it. We were eager; we were quick learners, and we were obviously dedicated. And I’m sure it didn’t hurt that when they stopped by to take a look at the sickly chickens or the broken baler, the women would wave a cheery topless hello from the garden.

But we did more than survive; we wrote and published books and magazines and

poetry; we started small businesses—candle making, selling wood stoves, a home bakery, and a restaurant; we learned to ask for help, to share resources. We made our own music, our own celebrations and rituals. We stayed connected to the politics of the country.

We did these things in the context of a revolution—we believed that. Things were going to change, and we would be a part of that change.

As one of our children recalls, “I was waiting for the revolution, which seemed imminent, and the kids I was in school with didn’t know one was brewing.”

## Lessons Learned

We all grow up in small environments, whether it’s a neighborhood in a big city, a suburb defined by its class structure, a small town, a large apartment building...or a commune. And at some point most of us leave where we grow up, armed with whatever tools and skills our families have been able to give us. My kids, and the others here, were blessed with people who were very smart and a little weird and utterly engaged with the world. They learned from four, six, 10 other adults, teaching them things their parents could not. I could teach my children to love reading, to assist in a cow’s birth, to whittle wood with a small sharp knife, to garden, to cook, to set a fire that would last the night, to shake cream in a canning jar until it turns to butter, to recognize a good snake from one to avoid, to milk a cow and a goat. I could keep them away from television. But someone else taught them to play the piano, sing, ride horses, ski, play baseball, build a table, learn languages, take apart an engine and put it back together, pick mushrooms, and tell time from looking at the way the light falls on a tree in the woods.

All of these young adults talk about the freedom they felt, the trust the adults had that they would make sound decisions, the safety of their surroundings, the physical beauty of the land, their adventures in the woods, the rituals, the ceremonies, the animals, the music, their friends—both adult and child.

Did we prepare them? Did the “experiment” work? They seem to have survived our whipped-up idealism and our oddly rigid principles without sacrificing an essential curiosity in and a deep appreciation of the life around them. Our best gift to them may have been just the encouragement to think, to explore, to take risks. Maybe our instinct was actually our best guide. They seemed to absorb us rather than listen to us. How else to explain Oona, at 10 or 12, reprimanding the younger girls to sit on the “thinking ramp” as a form of punishment?

I have never, not once, felt that my children lacked for the most essential things in life. Sure I screwed up once in a while. I wasn’t there during a violent thunderstorm when a fireball entered through a doorknob, made a sharp turn in front of my awed and terrified children and left the room through the answering machine. I worked late and forgot the Cub Scout dinner until I saw Amos standing bereft in the middle of the road in front of the house, tears of anger and hurt running down his face and onto that silly blue uniform full of badges.

I missed Michelle’s concert in fifth grade, the one in which she sang a solo. Everyone said she was perfect.

In the end, did we get it right?

For the most part, the kids of the communes appear to have developed a conscious appreciation of the way they grew up; the poverty tempered by the freedom, the collective adoration overshadowing any alienation they may have felt. Some might question the wisdom of our choices, the apparent carelessness of our child-rearing, or see us as lacking worldly ambition. I’ve heard them all. But somehow it worked for these children. They are truly different from one another and, more important, they did not end up as retrograde replications of their parents. They dreamed different worlds for themselves. They made mistakes and they made choices. But they all possess a similar confidence, a sureness of their place and a generosity of spirit that I think comes largely from being so loved. And I believe this is no small thing. 🐦

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*Catherine Blinder, a writer, editor, trainer, and consultant to nonprofits, currently lives in Hartford, Connecticut.*

# Nourishing One Another, 50 Years Later

By Catherine Blinder

*Adapted from an article “Back to the Garden: 1970s Commune Still Simmers With The Sense Of Revolution,” which appeared in the Hartford Courant on September 20, 2018; see [www.courant.com/opinion/oped/hc-op-insight-blinder-commune-revolution-at-50-story.html](http://www.courant.com/opinion/oped/hc-op-insight-blinder-commune-revolution-at-50-story.html).*

For three glorious summer days in 2018, I cooked alongside my dear friend, Verandah Porche, and women with whom I have cooked, off and on, for five decades. The occasion was the 50th reunion of the commune in Packer Corners, Vermont, where I lived in the 1970s, and where Verandah still lives.

My son, who was born on the farm, and his father came in from the West Coast and joined me for the drive up to the reunion. My daughter, who was two when we arrived at the commune, had just taken a new job and, sadly, was unable to come. But the core survivors and tattered edges of the radical left of 50 years ago—activists, novelists, farmers, teachers, musicians, filmmakers, labor organizers, poets, draft dodgers, radicals and rabble-rousers—gathered to celebrate.

They arrived from London, Barcelona, Montreal, Boston and Los Angeles, and came up the farm’s dirt road bearing baskets and boxes full of homegrown produce, a giant ham from a pig Sam raised, buttery baked sweets, gussied-up peaches and berries in pies and tarts, tomatoes, squash, beans, pheasant, burnished breads and more.

The command center at Packer Corners was always in the farm’s cacophonous kitchen, its thrumming heart. And now, once again, the sound of wooden spoons against wooden bowls, the comfort of cotton towels, dented dark-bottomed pots and peals of naughty laughter, became, for three days and two nights, our own Kitchen Esperanto—the language of a shared past, tribally secret.

The kitchen has fed thousands over the last half century, its wooden floors and counters polished with the repetitive grace of salty, working hands and gallons of cheap olive oil. Old knife gashes have become soft archeological evidence of meals past. If you put your palm to the wood and are quiet, it’s as if you can pull up the poetry, the song the iridescent promises of lovers, the hard-fought liberation and shared dreams that worked their way into the grain along with the small tragedies, lonely late night tears, and moments of unrelenting grief that play dead in the countertops and dark cupboards.

By the first afternoon, every flat surface in the farmhouse groaned under the weight of the collective generosity, and a giant pot of tomato sauce simmered and smiled like a sturdy country pieta blessing us from the stove. Fuses were blown and lights extinguished, reminding us that ample electricity is a luxury in the country. Small children, our village’s grandchildren, threaded through the kitchen to grab a carrot, a cookie, a waffle, or sweet things made from zucchini. Many of our children, who are now parents, have built houses on that land and watch their sons and daughters play in the same dirt, run up the same hill to where the Maypole stands every cold spring.

The first night, there was a slide show of old photos in the barn. The sight of our thrilled-to-be-alive, beautiful, young selves made us wonder aloud how we had managed to keep our appendages intact while rototilling butt naked. There was a massive bonfire to end the evening. The next day, in the soft rain, under a tent, there were readings from the many writers, followed by singing and a full reading of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” accompanied by live music.

And always, everywhere, there was food.

Food is about more than flavor. It is more than sustenance. In that farmhouse kitchen of 50 years ago, I learned to cook and feed for love. I learned that at a full and welcoming table you slowed down and listened, you opened up, you engaged and laughed and took risks. I learned there’s a rhythm to a good dinner table, a slow swaying start, a lively collective crescendo, and a sustained and raucous finale.

The cooking joy I learned in my early 20s at the farm—finding it there with other women—changed my life inexorably and sweetly. We learned together—grinding wheat berries in the old Corona mill to make bread, keeping food-giving animals alive and producing, spending a day butchering a pig, squeezing apple cider in a hand press, boiling down maple sap, churning butter, growing gardens and canning and storing their gifts. We learned to survive in a world we created, for better or worse.

The last night, a famous homegrown band played for three generations of ecstatic dancers. Then, a small knot of us stayed near the house, sitting around in chairs and on rocks, and talked softly, savoring every last bite of our weekend, appreciating our beautiful, imperfect, and scarred tribe, together again.

“You know, you really haven’t changed,” we told each other. And laughed out loud at our own generous lies. We did, of course, not look the same. But we still carry within us the core of who we were then—what we believed, how strong we were, and how loyal to one another and to the idea of cultural and political revolution. We believed in possibility. And in the obligation and privilege to nourish each other—body and soul. 🌱

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# The Many Failed Theories of Twin Oaks Community

By Keenan Dakota

**Editor's note:** This article is adapted with permission from Keenan's original blog post, which appears here: [communelifeblog.wordpress.com/2021/05/17/the-many-failed-theories-of-twin-oaks-community](https://communelifeblog.wordpress.com/2021/05/17/the-many-failed-theories-of-twin-oaks-community).

**Author's disclaimer:** This is actually an opinion piece by Keenan, not a well-designed experiment with a control group, or statistics, or any math at all. Repeat: this is NOT actual science.

Twin Oaks was started in 1967 in Louisa, Virginia as an experimental community by a group of people inspired by the behaviorist theory in B.F. Skinner's utopian novel, *Walden Two*. After 50+ years of ongoing experimentation, we now have some results to report.

**Theory:** A society can apply Behaviorism to improve individual members' function and happiness.

**Fail:** The very premise that brought the initial group together, that Behaviorism—widely and properly implemented—could remove undesirable human traits was the first failed theory of Twin Oaks. At Twin Oaks, human behavior has proven to be extraordinarily resistant to any generally applied theory or practices—for instance, interpersonal tension and communal drama are enduring problems at Twin Oaks. Kudos to the founders for choosing the survival of the community over clinging to an empirically failed theory.

**Theory:** A village can raise a child better than a family can.

**Fail:** In 1973, Twin Oaks began the official child program based on the theory that the whole community would be responsible for raising the children. Part of the rationale was provided by evidence from the mainstream culture with its child abuse, neglect, and enduring cycles of familial dysfunction. Obviously, merely being able to biologically procreate was no qualification for raising children, right? Sounds good in theory, but in practice there are many flaws with a whole community attempting to raise children. (The history of the kibbutz illuminates a similar arc in child-rearing theory—starting communal and evolving toward supporting families.) Twin Oaks, in a fairly short period of time, moved away from communal child-rearing toward emphasizing and strengthening families. These changes included designing living spaces that allowed closer family connection, writing policies that expected parents to be responsible for their children, and giving parents autonomy over how their kids were raised.

**Theory:** Members of a community become cohesive by living in close proximity to each other.

**Fail:** Early Twin Oaks designers clustered buildings to-



gether, clustered bedrooms together, and skimmed on sound insulation between rooms. For decades now, Twin Oaks has been remodeling to try to undo those early mistakes. Twin Oaks has learned that the ability to have privacy is absolutely key to happiness in a communal setting. Specifically, acoustic separation is a key component of successful community living.

**Theory:** *A strong community comes from a sense of connection to all of the members of the community.*

**Fail:** Close emotional connection tends to happen among small subgroups in a community, not collectively among all members of the community. The community is stronger when there are many subgroups that have tight emotional connections. Over the years here at Twin Oaks, many attempts have been made to build cohesion among the entire community, but these attempts have met with, at best, modest success. What has been more successful has been encouraging cohesion among small groups. Some small groups are living groups, some are work groups, and, of course, families are close-knit small groups. It turns out that strong families, because of their enduring commitment to the well-being of the community, are a foundational component for a robust and enduring community.

**Theory:** *Communal societies will defeat capitalism.*

**Fail:** To operate outside of capitalism entirely requires being almost totally self-sufficient; instead, Twin Oaks is successful due to operating several thriving businesses. In the communal movement, only very small groups of people have managed to be so self-sufficient that they can be said to operate outside of the capitalist system. Rather, it turns out that collective living is a very effective way to out-compete mainstream businesses. Communities can offer lower prices on products due to cost-cutting on labor. Communities have a skilled work force with higher quality control due to the workers owning the businesses. Additionally, communal businesses are surprisingly nimble; if one communal business shrinks, or fails, workers can—the very next day—start working in a different business at the community.

I refer here again to the kibbutz movement which has been thriving for well over 100 years. In its heyday, about two percent of Israel's population lived on a kibbutz; capitalists were not quaking in their boots in Israel. Even today, the kibbutzim run many large corporations in Israel.

However, a significant component of communal businesses is the creation of very empowered workers—since the workers also own the business. In a community business, workers are involved in every business decision. In addition to tremendous work flexibility, communal businesses do not build consciously shoddy products, nor have unsafe working conditions, nor run unethical businesses. If communes were to become a huge movement, empowered communal workers would provide a bulwark against the worst practices of mainstream capitalist corporations. So that's good.

But overturn Capitalism as a theory? No.

### Some theories that have worked:

Twin Oaks has managed to survive and thrive through the years by being nimble in shuffling through a lot of ideas quickly (and/or eventually)—discarding bad ideas that don't work.

Here are some theories that Twin Oakers adopted which actually worked from the outset.

**Theory:** *People thrive when citizens are equal.*

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Attempts to build cohesion among the entire community have met with, at best, modest success. Encouraging cohesion among small groups has been more successful.

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Photos courtesy of Keenan Dakota

**Success:** Twin Oaks' commitment to equality from day one has proven to be a successful and enduring theory. Every part of Twin Oaks' culture has been structured to create and perpetuate a society where the citizens are equal. A cost of this commitment to equality is significant constraints on some aspects of personal liberty. Economic equality requires constraints on individual members' accumulating wealth. Political equality limits members' ability to accumulate political power. Work equality (that is that no category of labor is valued as more vital than any other work) limits the tendency of a professional elite from developing. Overall human equality means there is no discrimination against any category of people. (Admittedly, the lack of a lower class does make it a bit harder to keep the place clean, as the lower class in almost every society does most of the cleaning.)

**Theory:** *Widely distributing power among the membership creates a strong decision-making culture.*

**Success:** "Light as a feather! stiff as a board!"—ever done that? If every member takes on some little bit of responsibility, then the community thrives. At Twin Oaks, power (decision-making) is widely distributed. Some people could plausibly point out that collective decision-making is problematic because there are so many things that the community is routinely failing to manage well, or at all. But in the mainstream, corporations fail all of the time. Additionally, mainstream corporations sometimes commit horrific evil.

The point is that, collectively, the community has continued to thrive in spite of having untrained amateurs in charge throughout the community.

It turns out that many people like having a little bit of power—or let's call it "agency." Since power is something that needs to exist, Twin Oaks has wisely decided to spread power throughout the community so that the need for the exercise of power does not contribute to the growth of evil.

**Theory:** *A well-functioning society does not need specialists.*

**Success:** We are all dilettantes here at Twin Oaks. The knowledge needed

to run a major corporation, or fix plumbing, apparently does not require years of study or apprenticeship. Any training that anyone needs is now available on YouTube. But even before the advent of YouTube, Twin Oaks built buildings, dug foundations, fixed cars, met government regulations, developed new products, filed corporate taxes—all without formal training in those skills.

It turns out that people like a diversity of work. Many members like the challenge of pursuing an entirely new career, or developing a new skill. Opening up to a diversity of work allows members the opportunity to explore personal interests. This makes people happier. Also, the community is more robust from having a deep bench of people who can work in any given work area.

**Theory:** *Children are important.*

**Success:** Twin Oaks has always put a significant amount of the community's labor resources toward raising children. Twin Oaks is an exceptionally child-focused community. The result is that Twin Oaks raises healthy, happy children who later become healthy, happy—and accomplished—adults. Prospective members who are considering having children choose to live at Twin Oaks. Prospective members who *don't* want to have children, but like to be around children, are drawn to Twin Oaks. Also, the presence of children in the community—including adults who grew up in the community—speaks to the enduring stability of Twin Oaks.

Ironically, or, perhaps, predictably, due to the amount of communal resources that go to raising children, Twin Oaks has set an upper limit on the number of children who live at Twin Oaks. Consequently, Twin Oaks tends not to tout our child focus online because the community is rarely open to more families with children moving to the community. Twin Oaks also keeps the child thing on the down low because we do want to raise happy, healthy children, not children who might suffer from the burden of representing the community or the communal movement, so we attempt to shield them from that cultural pressure.

**Theory:** *Behavior is changed by policy.*

**Success:** Policy is the one tool that the community uses that routinely alters members' behavior. Policy determines how much work people do. The community establishes nonviolence as a core value, and thus the community is largely free of any violence. Policy determines what decisions need to go through communal process. Policy determines what does and does not qualify as sick time. Members are remarkably respectful of policy decisions. Policy turns out to be the most effective tool for altering the behavior of people collectively—especially policy that members have a hand in crafting.

Through policy, community culture is created. To date we have created an enduring culture where members can comfortably and productively live their entire lives. Elders are cared for. Children are raised to be healthy and to recognize their own agency. Members feel equal and empowered.

But are people happier here, living in community? We don't have clear evidence. The hope contained in the initial focus on Behaviorism was to create empirically happier people. In spite of the initial motivation of the community's founders, and many, many attempts by various groups within the community, Twin Oaks has not yet found a theory that can effectively or routinely make individuals happy, feel fulfilled, eat well, defeat addictions, not be jealous, or be disciplined in attaining personal goals.

...so our collective experiment continues...

We will keep you posted on our results. 🌸

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# Getting to Know Beans about Community

By Chris Roth

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*Note: The names of the locales and individuals in the following true story have been changed, to protect Good Life Farm from a flood of unanticipated visitors, Oliver from a second public defenestration, and us from legal trouble. However, these fictional names may also be real names of actual places and people, so remember that if you do come across a “Common Share Farm,” for example, it is not the one described here.*

I grew up with some vague ideas about “community,” and a cursory familiarity with beans. I had some early experience of a “faith community” in my family’s church. Later, having enrolled in an alternative junior high school in the post-Watergate ’70s, I was intrigued by the previous decade’s communal impulses, listened to some of its music, and started to learn about its ideas and social-political movements. Still later, in between high school classes, I occasionally read about current communal experiments in the pages of COMMUNITIES magazine.

As for beans, I ate mostly the canned variety, with some fresh (albeit chemically-raised) local beans standing out in my memory. Vegetarianism introduced me to more ways of eating and thinking about beans in my late teens, during the heyday of protein combining.

The larger context of my life, however, did little to encourage in me a real understanding of community, or of beans. “If it can’t grow corn [beans], I don’t want any part of your religion,” Sun Bear once said, and though I didn’t articulate or understand my movement away from my family’s church in these terms, this may have been one of the reasons church did not feel right to me. But the competitive, individualistic educational and economic systems I eventually entered, having left behind organized religion,

had even less to teach me about true community.

Unbeknownst to me, the extended family of just a century ago—and before that, the tribe of just a few thousand years ago—had been replaced by the nuclear family, which was (despite the merits of my own particular family, which I suspect was among the picks of the crop) an inherently limited domestic reality. Human beings, who for eons had lived in intimate contact and connection with one another and with the sources of their sustenance, were now living in relative isolation from their larger human family, and from the earth and the food it produces. So, despite my intellectual interest in both “community” and “beans,” all of my actual experience of these, within the confines of the society I was raised in, was (so to speak) small potatoes.

The turning point came at the age of 20, when I was forced to recognize the harsh reality: I didn’t know *beans* about community—nor, for that matter, about beans.

Through a series of vignettes, this story will attempt to share some of what I learned about community, and about beans, over the course of the ensuing years. Consider this a rough sketch of one individual’s journey toward a deeper, more experiential understanding of community, and of beans.



## Scene One: The Eco-Bus

The Eco-Bus was my first immersion in 24-hour-a-day communal living, a full school year program through which I com-

pleted my final two years of college. Diametrically opposed to much of conventional education, it ran by consensus and emphasized “feelings” over “facts,” “process” over “product,” ecological sustainability over economic opportunism. My Eco-Bus “bean” memories illustrate both some upsides and some potential downsides of communal living:

**Hands in the Soil:** The Eco-Bus visited a Mennonite farm for a week every year, helping with such projects as bean harvesting. This was probably the first time I ever made a conscious connection between the bean plant and the beans it produced. I still remember the wonder of first digging my fingers through the soil, to where a peanut plant had plunged its flower stalk after pollination, and discovering peanuts there. Through this communal educational experience, I got my first inklings of the connections between culture and agriculture. Mennonites and Amish lived in an entirely different world from the one to which I was accustomed, one revolving around community and connection to the land. I wasn’t ready to hop off the bus yet, but the idea of a collective land-based culture had, for the first time, become real to me.

**Sharing Meals and Gas:** Students on the Eco-Bus cooked and ate communally, taking turns learning what it’s like to prepare food for a large group. We saved time by cooking together, and also shared the experience of giving and accepting physical nourishment within the group. This was a far cry from eating canned beans at the supper table in a suburban household, or, even worse, very questionable bean dishes served in a college dining hall. For many students, cooking for the group was an awakening.

The downside of this equation was the most common complaint and source of amusement on the bus: flatulence, sometimes but not always associated with undercooked beans and other culinary errors. This problem also drew attention to the cramped quarters and participants’ lack of personal space. Unfortunately, the general response to the physical closeness on the Eco-Bus was interpersonal distancing, which was exacerbated by confrontive, often nasty, communication patterns, and a code against physical affection. In their zeal to be part of the group, I and all other newcomers eventually fell into step with these tendencies.

**Loss of Individuality:** To be admitted into the Eco-Bus program, students had to agree to eat whatever was served, whatever everyone else was eating. My unsuccessful campaign to get everyone to adopt vegetarianism (so that I could be vegetarian) highlighted to me the frustrating lack of choice that went along with this bargain everyone had made. Ironically, while valuing diversity in the natural world, Eco-Busers had fallen into the trap of excessive conformity in the human world, even as they tried not to conform to the norms of the dominant society. While attempting to establish an alternative, more ecologically sensitive culture, Eco-Busers let their own individual insecurities lead them to behaviors every bit as cult-like as that of the “mindless consumers” they were trying so hard not to be. Group-think, group-act, group-talk, and scapegoating of dissidents were distressingly common. After two years, I had learned a little about community, but not much about living happily and peacefully within it. Yet some seeds had been planted.



## Scene Two: Pueblo

I spent nearly a year-and-a-half at a Pueblo in the American Southwest. Drawn to the vibrant culture there (which I’d visited on the Eco-Bus), especially the ritual dances associated with crop tending and harvest, I eventually saw how inseparable culture and agriculture were for these Pueblo people. Raising, storing, processing, and preparing food were all communal acts, carried out and celebrated in the traditional ways, and surrounded by art, stories, ritual, and prayer.

**The Value of Diversity:** I worked with a population normally marginalized in Western culture: the mentally alter-abled. The Pueblo parents had formed their own nonprofit care center as an alternative for their “different” children, who were thereby spared spending their lives in the off-Reservation “warehouses” to which many developmentally disabled Native people were consigned. They had a chance to grow up near their families, nurtured by the Pueblo culture that bound their people together. And, eternal children, they never lost their wonder for the world, and were a constant reminder to those around them of how miraculous even the most familiar details of our lives are.

**The Challenges of Gardening:** My first personal foray into the world of gardening occurred at Pueblo: I obtained some free seeds from a Native Seed nonprofit, and gave them to some other staff to plant and tend (since I knew nothing about gardening). Unfortunately, this garden did not do as well as the traditional Pueblos’ gardens and fields, which had sustained them for centuries despite harsh climatic conditions and very little water. Dogs dug up and destroyed all of the plants in this new garden. I was starting to discover that beans, like community, need careful tending and protection in order to grow safely to maturity.

**The Call of the Soil:** Recognizing that I would never understand Pueblo culture until I understood agriculture, I also saw that my opportunities for learning about that were limited by my circumstances at Pueblo, where, as an outsider to most of the traditional culture, I worked nearly every waking hour at the care center. Shucking corn one day with one of the more verbal of the center’s residents, I received a clear message that I needed to move on, if I wanted ever to truly understand corn, or beans, or the community that grows around them.



## Scene Three: The School of Soil

Beans’ functions in the garden are enough to inspire



gratitude in even the firmest anti-mystic. They increase soil fertility, their roots hosting rhizobial bacteria that fix nitrogen from the air and make it available to succeeding generations of plants. They are perfect “companion plants” to many crops, thriving in and contributing to the rich community of a diverse garden. Nutritionally, they complement those same crops with which they grow well. Some varieties grow as bushes, some as vines; some in the summer, a few over winter; some are black, some white, some purple, some green, some yellow, some red—and nearly every color of the rainbow in between.

**Land and People:** My first experience of truly supportive, sustaining 24-hour-a-day community came among the beans and students at the School of Soil. Together, I and a few dozen fellow gardeners (some, like me, neophytes; others more experienced) grew together as a community even as we grew vegetables, flowers, herbs, and fruit on the land. This was very different from most schools, where the primary activity seemed to be talking and engaging in mental gyrations. There was no point in putting on clean clothes at the School of Soil; a few minutes after the day started, they wouldn't be that way any longer. “Facts,” “ideas,” and “academic achievement” in the conventional sense were not the centers of attention, nor was abstract conversation—though conversation was always a pleasant accompaniment to the physical activity. The center of attention, the greatest teacher, was the garden itself, before whom all students were equal.

Being physically engaged with others out-of-doors in joyful and/or useful tasks—whether simply in play, in sports, or, most usefully of all, in gardening—seemed to me like an inherently grounding, essential ingredient in any whole human life, neglected at our own peril. I made lifelong friends, discovering that my own Indo-European heritage did not necessarily doom me to distance from nature and from other people.

**Old Habits Die Hard:** My old habits didn't die easily, however. Predisposed still to seeing beans as “dry beans,” which needed to be soaked and cooked, I had become fascinated and obsessed by solar cooking over the previous couple years. I fanatically stuck a pot of beans in the solar cooker nearly every sunny day at the School of Soil, even when it should have been obvious that fellow students were tired of eating cooked beans. Fresh beans and other vegetables sat unharvested in the garden on my cookdays, my thinking clouded by my less-than-thoroughly-examined conviction that solar cooking was an ecologically honorable and correct choice, which should always be used to its full potential (even if it means eating stored instead of fresh food).

Seeing myself as offering “salvation through solar cooking” to my fellow students, I felt hurt when my gift to the world did not meet with unqualified appreciation. Only when I started to learn beans about vegetables—the virtues of eating fresh out of a garden rather than cooking stored food for hours in a solar cooker—did my culturally-ingrained tendency to look for “salvation through technology” give way to appreciation of the more subtly offered gifts of the earth.



## Scene Four: The Sustainable Living Institute

**White Wonder Beans:** who had ever heard of them? And yet here I was, listening to Oliver, the founder and self-proclaimed director of the Sustainable Living Institute, expound on just how White Wonder Beans were going to save the world.

**Pledging Allegiance:** My tenure at the Sustainable Living Institute (SLI), coming on the heels of my School of Soil experience, was a strange mixture of accelerated, hands-in-the-soil learning, opportunities for “below-the-radar” cooperation, and dysfunctional community dynamics. Oliver seemed to demand absolute loyalty to his opinions, not only about White Wonder Beans but also about everything else, and it was relatively easy for me to adopt these opinions, since they usually made a lot of sense. Oliver's charisma and obvious intelligence made him SLI's “guru” and undisputed leader—especially since individuals or groups who started to mobilize against his influence in the organization were quickly moved out by Oliver and a few of his most loyal followers. Oliver's petty tyranny kept SLI firmly on the track he had set for it at the beginning: a no-compromise experiment in ecological living. Run by a residential “community” which also formed its staff, SLI was as divorced from the fossil fuel and money economies as a public nonprofit institute which welcomed visitors to its rural acreage could be, at least in the United States. Unfortunately, Oliver's domination of the group prevented true long-term community from emerging—except, at a distance, among ex-SLI staffers.

**Digging In:** And yet, I found that digging in at one location for a couple years, even in the midst of a very-far-from-perfect human community, helped me learn lessons about the soil, about gardening, about beans, that no shorter period could have. At the School of Soil, I had shuttled back and forth between the multiple gardens and rarely been able to follow a crop I planted or tended from start to finish. At SLI, however, I became intimately involved with the entire cycle, from soil preparation through planting, tending, harvest, and preparing for the next crop. I watched the seasons of the year come and go, and started to understand something that cannot be learned in an instant: *timing*. There are times to plant summer beans, and times to plant White Wonder Beans, and these vary with each year's particular conditions. Failure to respect the natural cycles of the earth, the weather, and the plants—neglecting to observe the conditions which will greet our newly sown crops—results more often than not in crop failure. In gardens, as in communities of people, continuity of care and attention allows for learning and growth. Even when the going gets rough, the act of digging in brings unique rewards.

**Appropriate Technology:** SLI offered one other benefit not as easily found in mainstream society: an opportunity to engage

with appropriate technology on a daily basis. My eco-technology repertoire expanded far beyond solar cookers to encompass hayboxes (retained heat cookers), solar water heaters, composting toilets, efficient woodstoves, and a host of other devices. Nearly everything that mainstream American society accomplishes in certain taken-for-granted ways (cooking, refrigeration, heating, building, etc.) can be done in quite different, ingenious, and often more ecologically benign ways. SLI's eclectic community setting provided a fertile environment for me and others to discover and experiment with some of these ways of supporting basic life needs. SLI's guiding precept of spending as little money as possible—and therefore needing to earn as little money as possible—meant that staff members had time to experiment with this level of creative subsistence living. Failure could mean being temporarily cold, hungry, and wet—but rarely was there any danger of monetary debt.



### Scene Five: Mapleleaf Community

Eventually the level of dysfunctionality at SLI, which emphasized “ecological vision” at the expense of “human values,” became paralyzing. I set out to find something better in the community sphere. Mapleleaf Community represented a radical, egalitarian alternative to Oliver’s ecologically pure (but far from egalitarian) petty dictatorship.

**The Benefits and Perils of Size and Egalitarianism:** Mapleleaf’s main attractions included its large size and diversity, and its lack of a dominating authority figure/boss. Socially, Mapleleaf offered me a breath of fresh air. But these same traits meant that ascertaining a guiding vision for the community could be difficult, and change, especially attitudinal and lifestyle change, sometimes happened at a snail’s pace. Members spent large amounts of time working in cottage industries that did not wholly resonate with my sense of purpose in the world, earning money to build buildings that (more than its gardens or any advances in “sustainable living”) were seen as measures of the community’s progress toward its goal of “a middle-class lifestyle on a poverty-level income.”

Half a year after joining, I recognized that, despite its indisputable merits, Mapleleaf was not sufficiently ecologically oriented for me. My community quest needed to continue.



### Scene Six: Good Life Farm

I moved on to Good Life Farm, a family-sized rural inten-

tional community where members were committed both to ecological values and to nurturing relationships.

**The Joy of Self-Sufficiency:** Good Life Farm raised upwards of 95 percent of its own food—not only vegetables but also grains, beans, fruit, and animal products. Farm-raised value-added products provided the income, which could be modest because expenses were also modest. Many building materials were also grown on site, and Good Life had the good fortune to be located in a county without building codes. Like Mapleleaf, Good Life was committed to, and practiced, income-sharing and egalitarian decision-making, but unlike Mapleleaf, Good Life had a spiritual, land-based focus, directly tied to its way of life.

**Time, Cycles, Timelessness:** The lessons of this rural life were many. With less focus on “education” and “research” than SLI, greater emphasis on the worthy work of day-to-day life on the land, greater physical isolation, and no petty tyrant or heavily-entrenched dysfunction, Good Life had many fewer distractions from the good life its members were leading. The beautiful, bountiful land, and all its diverse forms of life, were just as obviously members of the Good Life community as the human members and their domesticated animals. The cycles of the seasons swept up the members in their rhythms. Even more obviously than at SLI, there was a time, I learned, for everything—including, in the middle of the winter, skating on the pond, and in the summer, diving into it after a hot day in the fields. Sweat lodge ceremonies and seasonal rituals helped ground the members in an eclectic brand of paganism, their shared spirituality. Life at Good Life was cyclical, and almost timeless. If I hadn’t known anything about the outside world, the concept of linear time might well have become a happily-forgotten, distant memory.

**Splitting Hairs Over Beans:** In such an Eden, I was hard-pressed to find fault; but perhaps not every Adam belongs in every Eden. Just when I thought I’d learned beans about community, other beans started rearing their ugly heads.

First, coffee beans: Good Life members had a morning ritual of sitting on the couch drinking coffee and waiting for breakfast to be ready. I liked to go for a walk first thing in the morning, and not eat a heavy breakfast. Also, still a relative purist, I had doubts about the politics of coffee, even organically raised coffee: it wasn’t a bioregional crop. Neither I nor the rest of Good Life were necessarily wrong in their preferences, just different.

Next, dry beans: Good Life’s beans, like many of its crops, were planted and harvested by machine and grown in tractor-tilled fields. This was not a big deal, since I had been eating machine-processed dry beans all my life (except the hand-harvested White Wonder Beans at SLI, still a relatively small part of the diet there). But beans were not alone in this. All of the fields, and even the vegetable garden plots, were plowed by tractor, and virtually no beds were dug by hand, or prepared with sheet-mulching or other Permacultural techniques of which I had grown fond. I liked gardening without fossil fuels, even if it meant being less self-sufficient. I liked my body to be involved in all parts of the cycle. If farmers in the Peruvian Andes didn’t need tractors, I didn’t think I should either. Again, nobody was wrong—but personal preferences were different.

I also spent lots of time milking the cows and taking care of the chickens, but still couldn't bring myself to give up veganism. Influenced by my prejudice against cows, with their history of degrading many ecosystems and replacing many native animals on this continent, my ideals warred with the practical considerations of the well-established Good Life ways of doing things. How could an "environmentalist" live with cows? How much was I compromising myself?

**Isolation:** Ultimately, I left Good Life Farm because of social isolation, and because my purpose in the world didn't quite seem to fit there—not because of beans. My coastal sensibilities didn't quite match Good Life's midwestern flavor; I was one of just a few single people in a community of couples; and aside from the six to 10 people living at Good Life at any one time, I probably could have counted on one hand the "alternative" people (or "unrepentant latter-day flower children") living within a 50-mile radius. Forced to recognize that this Adam did not belong in that Eden, I migrated back to the neighborhood of my former stomping grounds.



### Scene Seven: Common Share Farm and Cornucopia Farm

After a brief return to the Sustainable Living Institute, which was experiencing major internal political turmoil, I decided to give the idea of "community" a rest, and attempted to live in a nearby small city. By imagining the traffic to be the sound of the ocean, I was able to coax myself to sleep at night. But I felt far from the land, and equally distant from the apparently well-adjusted city dwellers who surrounded me.

**Farming Forms Community:** After two months, springtime pulled me out of the city onto a Community Supported Agriculture farm. Common Share Farm supplied its subscribers with a weekly box full of vegetables, in exchange for a once-a-year fee. At Common Share, and at Cornucopia Farm, where I worked next, my most significant lesson was a reinforcement of what I had been learning for years: that human-scale farming creates community. I and my co-workers on both of these small organic farms shared our work, our living spaces, our meals, our lives. These "communities" only lasted a growing season, but they were communities just as real as and sometimes more genuine than those "intentional" communities that lacked a common vision or shared work. These farmhands' communities could also be prey to communication breakdowns, especially with no formal agreements or commonly-held expectations about the nature of the "community" that formed there. But bridging the gap between the world of "community" and the everyday work of farming, they gave me hope that "unintentional community" will form wherever relationship to the land brings people together.



### Scene Eight: Sustainable Living Institute, revisited, and beyond

An education junkie, I finally returned once again to the Sustainable Living Institute, which had finally rid itself of Oliver through a collective *coup d'état* several years before, and now needed a gardening instructor. Unfortunately, the White Wonder Beans had been allowed to all but die out too. I grew a big patch of them by saving seeds from the few remaining plants. It was less easy to maintain the kind of unifying vision that Oliver had held, and SLI often strayed from its former "ecological purity." But what it reaped in exchange was a newfound tolerance for diversity. We SLI-ers now had to think, speak, and act on our own behalf, stand up for what we believed in if we wanted it represented in the collective discussion and decision making. "Oliver says" no longer cut it. Staff gradually—and not without mistakes and difficult lessons—learned to use our empowerment within the organization to bring it much closer to the collective spirit that had been suppressed for so many years.

My "bean stalk" and quest for community didn't end with my return to SLI. Many more challenges lay ahead. To make a long story slightly shorter, I eventually recognized that I was ready to make a greater commitment to truly "intentional" community again: ready to put significant energy with other people into loving one another, rather than agreeing, too often, merely to tolerate one another.

But this is another story, one we don't have room for here. The essential nugget of wisdom to be extracted from all of this is that it is possible, with persistence, to learn beans about community, or about beans, even if you start out in nearly total ignorance. Other people have set out on this path even later in life than I did, and found that they, too, were rarely tempted to look back.

Since that fateful day when I realized I didn't know *beans*, I've learned more than I ever could have conceived of from within my limited worldview at the time, and made choices I'd only vaguely dreamed about before. Perhaps most significant, I've discovered that growing "beans" and growing "community" are not two separate choices. It's very difficult, if not impossible, to grow one without the other. 🌱

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*This article originally appeared in Talking Leaves: A Journal of Our Evolving Ecological Culture, Volume 9, Number 1, Spring/Summer 1999, "Cultivating Community." At the time, Chris Roth was editor of Talking Leaves, recent author of The Beetless' Gardening Book: An Organic Gardening Songbook/Guidebook, and custodian of the White Wonder Beans at Lost Valley Educational Center. Talking Leaves ceased publication in 2006 but two years later Chris became editor of COMMUNITIES, which he edits to this day.*

# Magic, Ever-Evolving

*By David Schrom*

I've made it! Fifty years of living the dream! At 75 I feel triumph, even exuberance, regardless of what comes next.

Oh, I've had hard times along the way, many of the kind I might have expected had I paused at the outset to contemplate the audacity of imagining me—a product of unabashedly egocentric post-WWII American society—learning to identify my own good with the common good. But who among the hippie or (in my case) hippie-influenced dreamers of that era paused to question?

To the dreamers of this era, “Thank you!” As we oldsters prepare to exit, few things are more satisfying than to see younger champions of a cause to which we've been so devoted.

If you're young, or naive at whatever age, please learn from my confession. I thought I already knew everything I needed to know about creating the community of my dreams, just as I presumed to know so much else about which I've been mistaken. I'd done family chores growing up. I'd contributed in school. I'd volunteered. I'd given to church and charity. These were preparations all. But, at least in my case, they were far short of sufficient to mature that loving by which we make each other's interests our own 24/7/365, even as we protect against converting interdependence to co-dependence. Expect challenges. Relish them. Give thanks for them. Love them. However persistent or recurrent, they're a crucible in which to forge a stronger self and community.

The words spill out, born of a half century of lessons, each in turn drawn from its own foundation in day-to-day life. In community I've learned about friendship, fun, and freedom, and about blunders, miscalculations, and setbacks. In times of difficulty, I've recalled often Abraham Lincoln's, “You can't fail until you quit.”

As our group has divided and regrouped, with one or another of us off to test waters elsewhere, sometimes returning in various ways and sometimes remaining distant in all, we've kept alive a spark of community, a vision of people joined in commitment to consensual, rather than coercive living, all for one and one for all. And we've done this both because we've tasted its joys, hunger for more, and want to offer them to others, and because we see it as key to human survival and self-realization. Viewing community in this way, we imbue our work to create it with an extra measure of meaning.

In community I've reaped advantages of partners in healthful living and public service, and I've benefited from vast economies of sharing, living way beyond my individual means even as I shrink my ecological footprint. Beyond these ample gains, however, has lain a surprising reward, a veritable jackpot that I now view as the greatest gift of community: opportunity to become vulnerable and transparent as I reveal day and night, year in and year out, a person behind a public persona.

Seeing myself reflected in words and actions towards me of a multi-national, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-talented, multi-skilled, multi-visioned stream of hundreds of co-residents, visitors, and guests has been both illuminating and sobering. Whether I've minutes or decades ahead, I'll live them changed for the better by having enjoyed the perspectives of these diverse mirrors and, with insights gained, adjusted my self-perception to be more accurate and my behavior to be more as I intend.

To all who are beginning, or even just contemplating intentional community, or are somewhere further along this path, including people younger than I, peers, and elders, I offer gratitude for partnership, however distant and seemingly disconnected from each other we may be. Experiencing the meteoric rise in interest in, and the

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Expect challenges. Relish them. Give thanks for them. Love them. However persistent or recurrent, they're a crucible in which to forge a stronger self and community.

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increasingly open and enthusiastic responses to the community in which I live, I perceive that while some may be a measure of our own evolution, much is evidence of increasing, widespread hunger for broad, deep, sustained, authentic connection. I give thanks to have been able to contribute to both a laboratory for, and a demonstration of the rewards and responsibilities of such connection.

In an era when Nature is admonishing us ever more firmly to see self and surroundings more accurately, that we may better predict consequences of our unprecedentedly large human family wielding similarly unprecedentedly powerful technologies, intentional community can be means to accelerate our learning. And as we see more clearly what we want as living beings and as humans, and the limits of our world to provide, community can be a means to concentrate on what we can generate and enjoy in abundance, our love and understanding, and to share with compassion for each other and respect for the Earth the limited capacity of the biosphere to fulfill material want.

Looking backward, I celebrate my and others' small steps towards oneness. Look-

ing forward, I imagine with a smile those steps we've yet to take. 🐦

*Since 1979, David Schrom has been a part of Magic ([ecomagic.org](http://ecomagic.org)), a service organization and intentional community doing pioneering work in "valuescience." Magic demonstrates how people can address individual, social, and environmental ills nearer their roots by applying science to discern value more accurately and realize it more fully. Contact [david@ecomagic.org](mailto:david@ecomagic.org) or via snail mail: Magic, Box 15894, Stanford, CA 94309.*



*Magicians, friends, and supporters celebrate Magic's 25th anniversary.*



*Author (pink shirt) with guests at Magic's 25th anniversary.*



*Magicians and friends celebrate winter solstice by planting local open space, December 2021. (Author wears blue hat in last row.)*

Photos courtesy of David Schrom

# The Past Is the Future: Intentional community shows us the way back

By Colin Doyle

Our modern society churns ever further away from both meaningful community and land-based expertise. Meanwhile, intentional communities keep a sliver of these skills alive, experimenting in bridging the humble-but-viable past and the limitless-but-untenable present. In the future I believe their experience will be valued much more than it currently is, as communitarians help the broader culture re-adopt successful approaches from the past.

Intentional communities are in a tricky position, trying to reinvent the wheel of cooperative living by bucking the dominant culture's trend of being progressively more self-focused and disjointed over time. At the minimum, this means dusting off the skills and attitudes of a century ago; it can also mean adopting what works from other cultures.

On the social level, communitarians learn how to communicate well and commit to each other and a project, in a country that is getting worse about these elements. For example, in the social media landscape of today, disrespect has become a norm, whereas at Lost Valley Educational Center (the community where I live) aggression and escalation are very rare. Modern America is also physically hypermobile, with many folks moving every few years as jobs and house values change. Here, Lost Valley does not buck the trend. While some intentional communities (like Sowing Circle in Occidental, California) have impressively little turnover, widespread mobility is reflected at Lost Valley, for better or for worse. Everyone is a renter of their space (unless it's a mobile unit they brought), which facilitates mere dabbling with commitment, as well as churn, which makes everything harder to do well. On the upside, it also serves as a release valve for tensions, and allows for a steady trickle of fresh energy and ideas.

On the level of land-based skills, before moving to my current community 11 years ago, I hadn't lived in the same location for a full six-month growing cycle in 14 years. How can a person learn to grow seasonal food in a situation like that?! As a result, I've learned to garden by A) personal trial-and-error (inefficient), B) asking people who know better (taking their time), and C) not learning it. Reinventing the wheel is slow going....

## Wider context of decline

I believe the current trajectory of our society (and world, increasingly) will not continue much longer. From a historical angle, I can simply ask, "For how many hundreds of generations has grid electricity existed? For how many millennia has food been transported by combustion engine 1500 miles from where it grew?" Such questions reveal that our current affluence is both newfangled and shortsighted (or more entertainingly, newsighted and shortfangled). From a more practical angle, there is much documentation of declining critical resources, à la peak oil, peak phosphorus, and indeed peak *everything*.<sup>1</sup> With cheap fossil fuels burned up, what will we put on the soil to get crops to grow? Michael Pollan says that for every calorie of food Americans eat, 10 calories of energy went into it.<sup>2</sup> This is clearly unsustainable, and the bubble will have to burst.

Given that the current consumptive orgy won't last long, I see no other direction for society except toward less complexity. Far-flung systems with infrastructure built

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I believe that multi-million-person cities will localize into neighborhoods, and the world will again feel big and hard to move around, as it always was until just recently.

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on a fossil fuel economy—like electrical grids and server farms—seem almost guaranteed to break down irreparably and/or run out of fuel to run them. I expect the economy to naturally recenter on local needs (whether in collapse mode or not), in the same way that farmers' markets teemed with consumer demand early in Covid. Permaculturalist David Holmgren has identified four future scenarios, and concluded that neither techno-fantasy (think colonizing other planets) nor green tech stability (think solar panels) is realistic for our future.<sup>3</sup> In an energy descent world where there is no longer much possibility of being a computer programmer, plastic surgeon, or flight attendant, attention will naturally refocus on everyday necessities, especially as they get harder to meet.

Instead of one percent of Americans engaging in agriculture (like today<sup>4</sup>), I think local food production will proliferate, because every person needs to eat every day. Being far less able to use fiat currency to outsource the basics, occupational specialists are likely to be replaced by homesteading generalists, as most folks were for thousands of years (and still are, in the parts of the world where they haven't been absorbed into the market economy). Simplification is a calling card of our past, and, it seems, our future. I also believe that multi-million-person cities will localize into neighborhoods, and the world will again feel big and hard to move around, as it always was until just recently. This is how our future is likely to look impressively like our past.

### A step ahead?

Perspective on that past is a good way to measure a group of people. In today's rebellious youth culture of the West, old people are uncool and definitely not worth hanging out with. In intentional communities we regularly hold elders in higher regard, speaking of their wisdom. But that often doesn't translate into real action—for example, at Lost Valley there is no age-in-place setup, and I find myself rarely asking these troves of experience for their insights or stories, even though in their shoes I would want that attention and recognition myself. Alas...

On the tangible skills front, we have to

push ourselves to see self-sufficiency as more than just quaint, but actually respected and invested in. For example, Lost Valley hosted the local Kindle Cascadia winter solstice skillshare for three years. For many people this is an introduction to Earth skills that pushes their edges in areas like animal butchering, basketry, and working in supportive clans. Meanwhile, most traditional peoples master these skills by their teens. While communitarians may explore these activities more than Americans at large, most of us come from the same urban/suburban stock, with little land-based expertise to start with.

One upside for intentional communities is that a conscious choice to consume less than the rest of society—an environmental tenet in many communities—will likely ease future rumbles for them. Voluntary simplicity means there is less far to fall to a future of *involuntary* simplicity. Communitarians are likely to be more comfortable



*Khyla Allis and Alex Dallman are deep in the manual work of animal raising and culling. These ducks were eating but not laying, so they eventually got eaten themselves.*

Photos courtesy of Colin Doyle



*A generic subdivision somewhere in America, with no past, no personality, and no real future.*

with having fewer luxuries, and able to adjust to such changes faster.

### Pulled away from what works

Note that the further the broader society gets from real sustainability (i.e. things that could be done for the next 30,000 years), the further intentional communities do too, because we get inadvertently pulled along by the surrounding cultural juggernaut. This makes the challenge to bridge the chasm harder, because that chasm steadily widens. For example, for a number of years recently Lost Valley had a perfectly functional pedal-powered washing machine. Despite being inspiring to people on tours, almost no one on-site used it. I believe this is because we all grew up with push-button machines that wash clothes for us—my generation is not accustomed to using basins or hands for such things, whereas a few generations ago that was the norm. More recently, most Americans have gotten quite good at using web searches, spreadsheets, and apps. Doing so pulls us another step away from the level of technology we used in

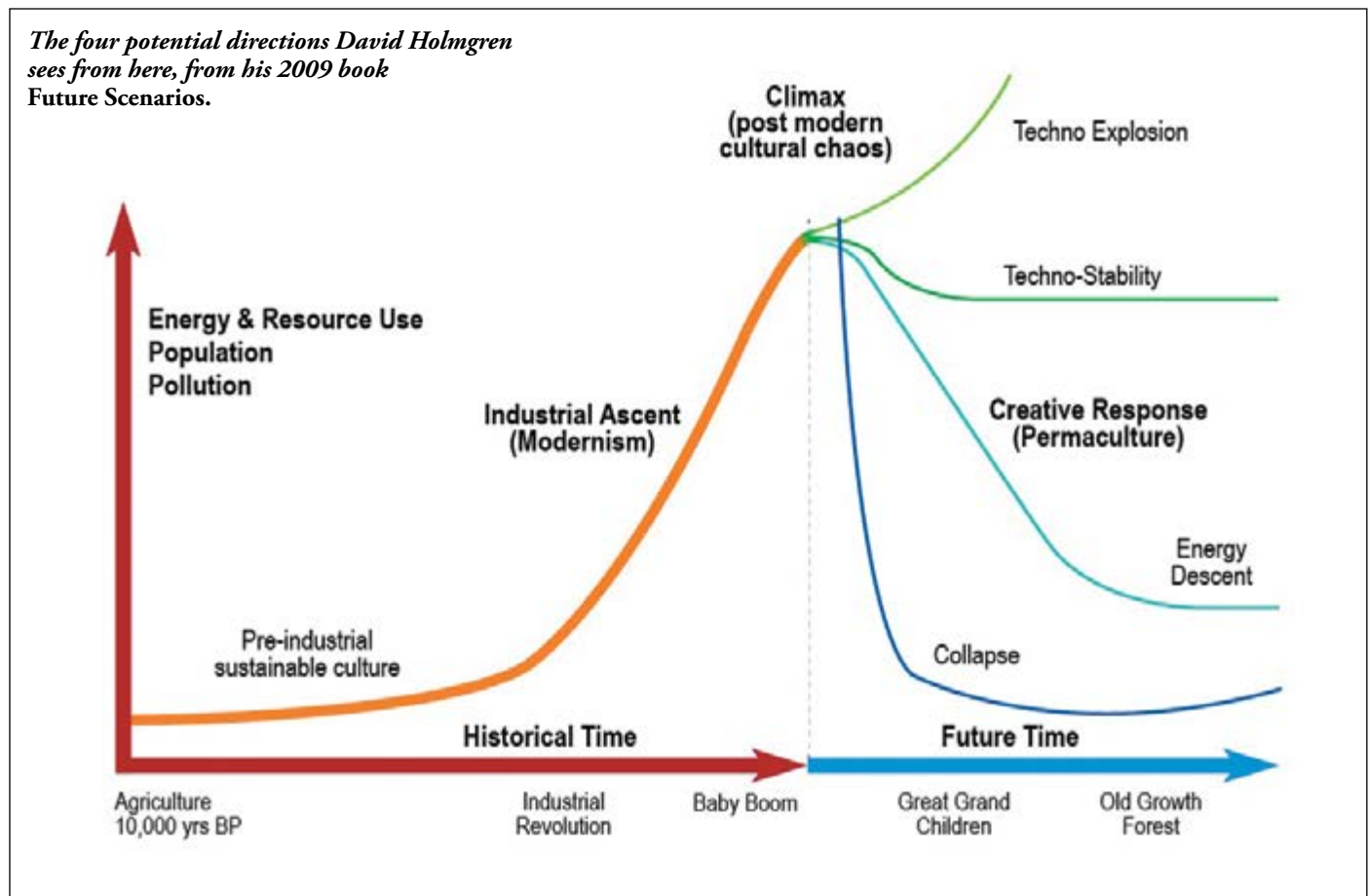
the past, as well as in a future that I think will be far simpler than the present day. This trend is present at Lost Valley also, where smartphones and Slack have become the norm (as well as Zoom meetings during the first year+ of Covid).

### Cooperation when it's needed

I see intentional communities as a training ground for thrown-together post-collapse community, partly based on what we think has worked in past decades/centuries and partly invented on the fly. Given the shocks that will come, I believe everyone will return to local collective living whether they want to or not, and intentional communities are a step ahead on this front. We're leading in going back. This will include pushing for our pared-down future to be a cooperative one instead of a survivalist/prepper one—I expect there to be a strong tension between these two approaches.

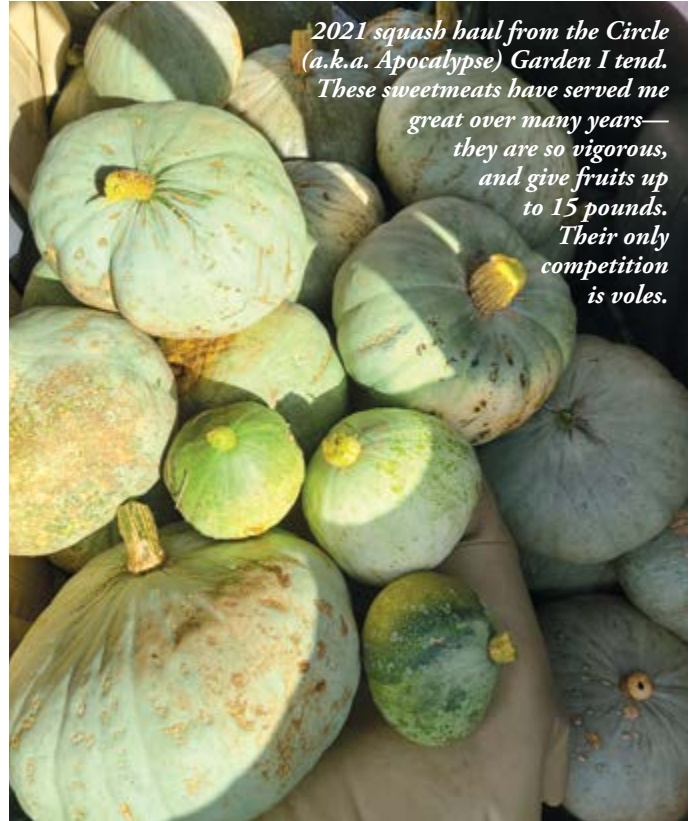
All of this is happening in an era when it's still quick and easy to find helpful tools online, such as Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication*, or Joanna Macy's *The Work that Reconnects*, or sociocracy with John Buck, or greywater handbooks, or forest gardening tomes. The irony is that once these great guides are finally in high demand in a hard-turning culture, they will be much harder to access. Seize the day (i.e. internet while we still have it)! Communitarians are getting more familiar with these resources than the broader society is, using a smaller proportion of their digital energy to focus on popular distractions like, say, the Kardashians or the New York Yankees.

What happens when the lights go out? During blackouts, people lean in the direction of both fearful self-protection *and* graceful sharing. Such a moment can be a litmus test for where a given person or neighborhood lands on the me-to-we spectrum.<sup>5</sup> Intentional communities are cooperative by design; we are carrying out the collectivist urge *before* the lights go out. Granted, these experimenting centers progress in fits and starts—the majority of forming communities never get off the ground, and some that do don't last for long (for example the bold Circle of Children experiment in Triangle Lake, Oregon).





Author.



2021 squash haul from the Circle (a.k.a. Apocalypse) Garden I tend. These sweetmeats have served me great over many years—they are so vigorous, and give fruits up to 15 pounds. Their only competition is voles.

Others last for decades—Lost Valley has, because of a combination of skill, determination, and luck.

I see intentional communities as helping keep interpersonal and Earth skills alive until the demand for them increases in the rest of society. This is like seeds being held in safekeeping until the masses are ready to till the soil again, à la monasteries during the Dark Ages. In that sense we are in community for both a high quality of life as we go, plus a chance at rebirth and spreading when the time is ripe.

But it's worth noting that people seem to choose intentional community primarily for the happiness of themselves and their family, while a more minor motivation is spreading functional models to the rest of the world (now or in the future). Even if this is just an afterthought or unintended bonus, it is a valuable one—I've met a number of former Lost Valley residents who, after moving out,

realized how much need there is out there for the skills they learned in community. When major rifts tear at our nonviable societal patterns, the capacities that communarians and subsistence farmers have—for example, in conflict resolution, natural remedies, market gardening, and woodlot management—will be in high demand. I believe the general population will finally value what these folks do, and compensate accordingly. “One day soon you will need us.”

### In conclusion

Because I believe the astounding complexity and fragile resource base of our society can't last much longer, I see the future as consisting of local, organically-evolving communities. This will consist of people turning *toward* each other, not *away* as is the norm today. Instead of being proximate but disconnected—like a cookie-cutter subdivision I recently visited in Austin, Texas—folks will act a notch more like at Lost Valley. I don't expect there to be thought-out group process for admitting new members, but instead a way that is more fluid and closer to traditional unintentional community.<sup>6</sup> Intentional communities aren't a one-size-fits-all solution, and don't work for everyone, but will help us all get back to what works better. For, after all, the past is the future. 🌱

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*Colin Doyle has lived at Lost Valley Educational Center (also called Meadowsong Ecovillage) in Dexter, Oregon since 2010. He was Education Director for a decade, and Event Director for half that long. He is a fan of deep honesty, puns, dark chocolate, and bodacious mountainscapes.*

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1. See the book *Peak Everything* by Richard Heinberg.

2. “10 Calories in, 1 Calorie Out—The Energy We Spend on Food,” Melissa C. Lott, 8/11/11, *Scientific American*, captured 11/17/21, [blogs.scientificamerican.com/plugged-in/10-calories-in-1-calorie-out-the-energy-we-spend-on-food](https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/plugged-in/10-calories-in-1-calorie-out-the-energy-we-spend-on-food)

3. David Holmgren, *Future Scenarios: How Communities Can Adapt to Peak Oil and Climate Change*, Chelsea Green, 2009.

4. “Finding the Future of Agriculture,” Ed Avalos, U.S. Department of Agriculture, captured 11/17/21, [www.usda.gov/media/blog/2013/08/26/finding-future-agriculture](https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2013/08/26/finding-future-agriculture)

5. See Yana Ludwig's work for more about the me-to-we spectrum.

6. If this phrase interests you, dig deeper with my article “The Resilience of Traditional Unintentional Communities” in the summer 2020 edition (#187) of *COMMUNITIES*.

# CITIES ARE SHIFTING; How Can We Still Build Community?

By *Kylie Tseng*

Three years ago, my family and I bought a house in Berkeley. The deal was this: my parents would finance the house and I would make sure that the taxes and maintenance of the house were taken care of.

As a first-generation American, I was excited that my parents could provide this for me. Both my parents had grown up without home ownership. I heard stories of my grandparents who rented out single-room apartments above Chinese restaurants they worked in, and times when they were sharing the living room floor to sleep on. To be able to bring up children in a stable single-family home was their dream.

I, perhaps in my youthful rebellion, do not share their dream. I've always craved something different from the nuclear family and, considering also the gravity of our times, started to dream of something more radical, something more collective. So when the opportunity arrived to convert this house we owned into a piece of that dream, I took it.

The first step to this dream was collectivising the house. I didn't want the responsibility of being a landlord. It was too much responsibility and I felt uncomfortable with profiting from a house that was already an asset to me. So with the help of my co-creator Jonah, we created a five-person co-op called Crescent House.

Crescent House runs on a transparent finance system that has two funds: house and food. The food fund is simple; this is where our monthly dues go to pay for our shared groceries and toiletries. The house fund is a little more nuanced. This is where rent on a sliding scale is deposited and used to pay for property taxes, house insurance, house projects, special house items and dinners, donations to organizations, and whatever we collectively decide to use it on. We share the labor of decision-making empowered by a mutual tending of house affairs.

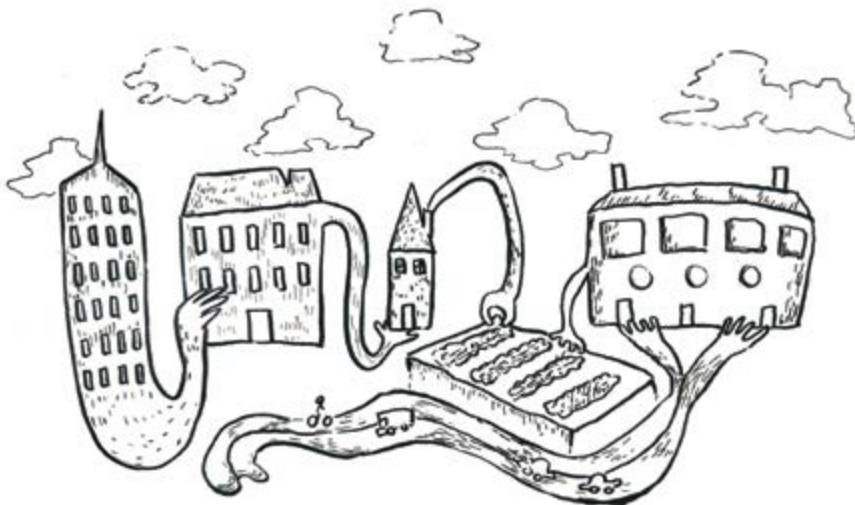
Crescent House is one of over 300 cooperatives in the Bay Area. And depending on whose perspective you get, that number is rising as folks adapt to the expensive housing market or falling due to people fleeing the area. From my perspective, it seems both are true. I know many cooperatives in this area that have dissolved and I've also been lucky enough to participate in the creation of new housing cooperatives.

If both are true, who are the people staying in this massive, multi-city area with some of the highest housing prices and one of the deepest legacies of cooperatives in the States? And what do they have to teach us about forming cooperatives in cities? And lastly, where does Crescent House fit into all of this?

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Kylie Tseng

To answer these questions, I wanted to look at a few examples that felt unique to the Bay Area where land has been taken back for common use and where cooperative models are being practiced.

In 2012 a plot of agricultural land in the East Bay that was the last remaining bit to a once 100 acre parcel owned by the University of California at Berkeley was slated to be developed into a parking lot, a Whole Foods, and a nursing home. Students and community members rallied together and occupied the land by planting seeds and raising chickens and bees without the permission of the University. UC Berkeley fought back, erecting a fence around the tract, which led to occupiers rallying support and finding unique ways to continue their protest such as building a slide to get farmers over the fence. And when UC Berkeley stopped the water, community members ferried water from their own homes.

After several months of resistance, UC Berkeley came to an agreement with the organizers to keep the land as agricultural land. Now, Giltract, which sits between two busy streets and a UC housing development, runs as a community-stewarded farm hosting a solidarity farm stand that provides free, fresh, Giltract produce.

This fall, East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperative (EBPREC) announced its purchase of Esther's Orbit Room. Once a community staple in West Oakland, Esther's Orbit Room has been closed for 10 years. EBPREC raised over four million dollars to purchase the property, with the support of several foundations and individual investors who bought shares of \$1,000 each.

EBPREC's first project was buying a house with the help of the Northern California Land Trust and converting it into a co-op. And with their model of raising money through individual investors who are aligned with EBPREC's goals, they are continuing to raise money and create affordable alternatives in the Bay Area.

Esther's Orbit Room will soon be transformed into a community event space as well as a rentable commercial space along with three units on the top floor rented out. One of the units will be rented out at market rate, subsidizing the two below-market-rate units.

Both EBPREC and Giltract come behind a legacy of alternatives that the Bay Area is known for. Yet in both of these organizations there is also a strong presence of a younger generation who see the potential to use these organizations to uproot another legacy of this area. For example, Giltract shares its land with Sogorea Te' Land Trust, an indigenous-led land trust that is rematriarching land in the Bay, as well as Black Earth Farms, a black- and indigenous-led agroecology collective. EBPREC works on providing affordable housing and job opportunities for black, indigenous, people of color.

As organizations in cities, both Giltract and EBPREC are diverse in their methodology. With available people-power in the East Bay, both orgs have been able to use strategies like nonviolent direct action, community organizing, partnerships with other organizations, and funding through individual investors. Both organizations have successfully created systems that work within the confines of their realities.

In the case of Giltract and EBPREC, I can see how easy it would be to say that the conditions that they started out in would make it impossible for them to succeed. Giltract was going against a massive institution and development project and EBPREC is facing some of the fastest-growing housing prices in the country. Yet both Giltract and EBPREC are examples of ways the highly populated Bay Area community along with the wealth and traction this city raises can create dissent to the status quo.

Often, I catch myself discounting people or places as options for community. I worry that a place is too rural, too red, too young, too old, etc. Yet I'm starting to shift my mindset to see that these attributes can often be a community's points of strength. What is available is not only what we have to work with but is often more of an asset than we might imagine it to be.

Before Crescent House, I was stuck. I was unable to act in alignment with my values. It felt fraudulent to have privilege yet have a desire to be part of a broader movement to create more equity within my community.

The answer for me was to face my reality and ask for support from my community to create systems that could turn what I had into something that could create value for myself and those around me.

And in considering our cities today, my answer feels the same: to look around at what there is and to use those unique qualities to build and reclaim our future. 🌱

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*Crescent House.*

Photo courtesy of Kylie Tseng

# The Journey of a Multifaith Community Experiment and What Happens When You Don't Own the Land?

By Joyce Bressler

This morning as I was contemplating how I was going to write this story, I sat with my morning Yogi Tea and read the tag on the tea bag. It read “Serve all in truth, in compassion, and in grace.” This became my “kavanah,” a Hebrew word meaning intention, to tell the story from my perspective of one community’s journey before and during a pandemic.

The Community of Living Traditions (CLT) was first conceived in the minds of its founders in 2008 as an experiment in cooperative living among Jews, Christians, and Muslims to learn about each other’s traditions and to work together for our common goals of understanding and social justice in the world. Several of our founders were active members of the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) and they turned to the struggling Stony Point Conference Center (SPC) owned and run by the PCUSA to bring this experiment and their collective vision to life there, in Stony Point, New York.

SPC was in need of a new Director. Two of our founders stepped up to fill the position. Their ideas of bringing Jews and Muslims together in a Christian-run center was not initially accepted with enthusiasm by the PCUSA’s national headquarters based in Louisville, Kentucky. However, they began the experiment at SPC, with some optimism that would change. They used the structure of SPC’s volunteer residential sys-

tem to bring in new residents who would over time make up the Community of Living Traditions. That name reflected their understanding of their faith traditions and texts as living entities and as bases for their common commitments to building and contributing to the movements for peace and justice.

In the Spring 2021 issue of *COMMUNITIES*, whose theme was Faith in Community, I wrote an article titled “Pigs and a Broken Leg in a Multifaith Community.” In that article I focused on two events that demonstrated my experience as a Jewish member of a multifaith community, as well as how we built faith in our community. At the end I said that our future there was uncertain and that perhaps the rest of the story would be shared in a follow-up. This is that follow-up.

## Looking Back

I joined the Community of Living Traditions in the Summer of 2013, after a difficult year of personal loss, decreased hours at work, a challenging relationship with my landlord, and rising rent. I had always envisioned that I would live in an intentional community again after living in communal settings in Vermont in the 1970s, and I had already developed a relationship with the folks at the Stony Point Center through my social justice and interfaith activism. I had worked closely in many ways with the founders of CLT. I was grateful to the community for the support and healing space it offered, and the opportunity to use my many skills in helping grow the intentional community. I had been a part



*Climate March in DC, 2017.*

of a cohousing group in the 1990s that eventually disbanded after three years of meetings without being able to find a suitable site. I no longer had the energy to start a new group as we had then, so this looked like a good opportunity.

However, at the time I was aware of the limitations of being on land owned by a national church based in another state that pulled the purse strings, and I knew that our vision of a multifaith community was an experiment. I was also aware that our housing was connected to our work relationship with SPC. We residents were shielded from some of the dynamics, since the managers were the liaisons.

As much as the management sought autonomy from the national church, it never materialized. Our individual contracts, that we referred to as “covenants,” were reviewed annually. Our living arrangements, as well as our work assignments, were subject to the decisions of management. Although we participated in decisions in a cooperative manner through consultations, the influence of our input could be limited due to the nature of running a business. While some people stayed for short periods of time, others became long-term residents, creating a more stable core group. The management carried the weight of running the business, which was an overwhelming responsibility. The needs of community members and the needs of center operations sometimes came into conflict.

One of the first projects CLT initiated was a Summer Institute for young adults from the three faith traditions. Some coming from all over the world, they lived together for a designated number of weeks to study and work the land. It was called “Farm the Land, Grow the Spirit.” Part of their day was dedicated to working and expanding the Stony Point Center gardens as well as learning about each other’s faiths, especially in relation to understanding and action.

The program ran from 2010 until 2019. In 2014 I became the Jewish leader of the program. The 2020 institute was canceled due in part to the Covid pandemic. The Summer Institute helped the SPC farm grow over the years and SPC was able to hire a full-time farmer in 2013, and an additional farmer a few

years later. In the 10 summers that it was held we mentored and learned from over 100 participants. We are very proud that they took what they learned back to their communities, countries, and the world.

Our commitment to food justice and growing local food for the dining facility expanded. This added to what attracted people to come to the center for their meetings and conferences. We also began to network and recruit people from the activist community as well as Jewish and Muslim organizations, with significant overlap. Over the years this added to the success of the conference center. Many of the guest groups felt welcomed by the “radical hospitality” offered by the staff and volunteers, including the multifaith residents. People from marginalized communities, including BIPOC and LGBTQ+ folks, were finding a safe space there. We also participated in interfaith and activist organizing efforts locally, nationally, and around the world, adding to the growing success of the conference center.

As we all know in the intentional communities movement, living and working in community can cause conflict, no matter what our backgrounds. We developed and used a variety of tools for conflict resolution, including Nonviolent Communication (NVC), some of our own homegrown methods, as well as outside consultants, to varied degrees of success and failure. However, this type of living arrangement and work environment is not for everybody. Personal conflicts caused some to leave and/or harbor long-term resentments. The roots of many of the problems we encountered were structural. We delved deeper into issues of race, class, and gender.

As SPC became more successful the Presbyterian Mission Agency (PMA), the agency of the PCUSA directly responsible for SPC management, began to develop a master plan for the conference center, expanding their Christian mission, which includes fighting racism and poverty. There was some movement of support over the years for our experiment as a multifaith community. But in the end, they were mostly concerned about the bottom line and the liability and possible legal ramifications of our arrangements.

It became clear in 2019 that they wished for our arrangement to change. There was an attempt to alter the structure of the conference center, adding new paid staff and eliminating all volunteer positions. The PMA would have more control over the mission of SPC. It didn’t leave a lot of room for Jews and Muslims as equal partners. At that point CLT had decided to expand our membership to also include other faiths as well.



Photos by Community of Living Traditions members

In the Fall of 2019, we were asked by the PMA to become a 501(c)3 tax-exempt organization, which would address some of the legal issues they were concerned about. It was our understanding at the time that doing so could codify our relationship as both residents and partners in programmatic work. We were given until May 1, 2020 to come up with a plan, and a date of August 2020 to incorporate. Amazingly we did this, creating documents of accountability for our members and an application to the IRS. We acquired our 501(c)3 status.

However, the pandemic changed everything. The hospitality industry was hit hard. Stony Point Center had to close and then it laid off most of the staff by June and the rest by December 2020. We were kept afloat for a time by the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and severance packages, while we were in negotiations to remain in our homes during a pandemic.

In the end they decided that they no longer wanted a residential community on the property nor did they want a programmatic relationship with CLT as a nonprofit corporation. Basically, they just wanted us to leave. We see the irony of the contradiction between the goals of the PCUSA to fight racism and poverty, and their role as a business in a capitalist system. Our members included people aged from infancy to the elderly, people of color, immigrants, and LGBTQ+ folks, with some having little outside means and nowhere to go. We needed time to find safe alternatives for all of us remaining. Our efforts to continue our time at SPC in order to find safe alter-

natives hit an impasse so we retained the aid of a pro-bono attorney to finalize our negotiations. The homes we occupied remain empty at this writing, as the conference center reemerges as a downsized operation.

Most of us have left the property and are scattered around the country, with several people having joined other intentional communities. A few are still in temporary and transitory situations, with one household unable to leave for several months and facing eviction from the PMA. The New York State eviction moratorium will expire before this article appears, if there is no extension.

### Looking Forward

The Community of Living Traditions, Inc. survives in its new iteration as 2021 comes to a close. We are reorganizing our Bylaws and reconstituting our Board of Directors with a focus on educational and charitable programs and continuing the nonprofit organization. We meet primarily on Zoom, as some of our members are now on two coasts. We have continued our social justice activism with our partners in the immigrants' rights movement, indigenous solidarity movement, and other diverse religious and activist groups. Having been part of an intentional community we maintain close ties and offer support and connection as we move on with our lives, families, and jobs. And as a network of people who have developed language and skills around multifaith and antiracist community building, we are striving to support other such efforts. We will soon have a website and you can see us on Facebook.

There is still more to come. I am sure others will want to tell their stories. I personally am now living in a mobile home park. I am getting used to the new place and a different sort of community, as I mourn the loss of what was special and share gratitude for where I have landed. There are still unresolved issues. The SPC has denied the CLT use of the campus for meeting space, as they continue relationships with organizations we have helped to birth and are still integral to. We don't want the SPC to fail under the pressure of losses from the pandemic, as we want the land to be preserved and for all our networks to be able to use the campus resources. So, do book your meetings there, but ask, "Where is the CLT?"

Even though I would have liked it to turn out differently, I cherish the relationships built and lessons learned—especially the lessons from the challenge of starting a community on land owned by another entity. Hopefully these lessons can help others as they navigate the various ways to start and maintain intentional communities. Blessings on your journeys. 🌿

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*Joyce Bressler is the Co-Director of the Community of Living Traditions, Inc., and the Ads Manager for COMMUNITIES. You can reach her at [ads@gen-us.net](mailto:ads@gen-us.net). Her current interests are to do more writing from her life experience, and to connect to local movements, especially in the area of environmental justice. (See [facebook.com/CLTmultifaith](https://facebook.com/CLTmultifaith) and [communityoflivingtraditions.org](https://communityoflivingtraditions.org).)*



# Our Past, Our Future, and Making the Most of Human Capital

By Rev. Jacqueline Zaleski Mackenzie, Ph.D.

*If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude.*  
—Maya Angelou

In 2021, nearly every conversation that I had with friends, peers, or young people included complaints related to their frustrations at our current state of affairs. Usually, one of us starts by saying that there seems to be too much to consider: politics, economics, climate change, and various aspects related to the pandemic. Even the October 2021 virtual meeting of The Parliament of the World's Religions primarily addressed one or more of these concerns from the standpoint of helping your community or congregation adapt, especially without answers. Yet, apparently, we are all frustrated.

No one seems to have any clear, practical, consistent, or even logical answers other than to use the word “unprecedented” at some point in the conversation. In other words, they are saying: “No satisfactory answers” are apparent to most people, including local, national, or international leaders who continue to pivot frequently. Honestly, those facts are probably why this has been a more challenging article to write than any other I have ever written for this publication.

As an academic, when I write a nonfiction article, I typically link every reference; this time, only a few are specific—the rest are for your own exploration. That was my choice because with medical needs unattended in most locations worldwide; month-long shortages of staff, equipment, or other requirements for medical, governmental, educational, nonprofit, and commercial operations; illness or death from an ongoing worldwide pandemic sparing few families or friends, this article will not always be as specific. Feel free to email me if you want any references. Like Greta Thunberg, I have found that when I consider the future in general, I see many challenges and few solutions, even in my own destiny.

Sadly, my predictions for our future are the result of knowing in the 1960s that environmental issues should be at the forefront by now. However, those challenges and concerns are far worse than experts in more recent times had predicted or than I had even begun to imagine! Additional challenges are not as clear-cut, as our current Anthropocene Epoch concerns our planet's environmental challenges.

I suggest you look at my logic as just *one* possible way to plan your future community home, career, retirement, or whatever goals you have considered for your own future. By no means do I have enough answers, but I am working hard to be positively engaged in the community where I live, the online communities that I love to visit, the limited face-to-face options that are too rare, and the daily hesitations I feel about opening the latest news reports on my computer.

## Challenges, Skills, Gifts, and Passions

I'm the daughter of survivors of the Great Depression; my father's family had fled cultural oppression in Poland. In over seven decades of living, I've been in 49 states, seen most of Canada, Mexico, and Europe, and some of Central and South America; raised three children of my own; helped raise foster kids and step-kids, and taught preschool through college. I've taught single-engine flying; I've managed a nonprofit for 36 years; I spent 23 years in the foodservice industry as a waiter and an owner. Domestically, I was my mother's primary caregiver for 10 years, have done caregiving for my disabled husband for 28 years, and with a PhD in Special Education, I've also

been the caregiver of my public, private, and faith-based programs for students.

I suggest that you, too, assess your **Human Capital**: your past challenges and your skills, gifts, and passions. What have you learned about your outside world, your local community, your family, and yourself?

Hindsight after a pandemic has enlightened the public to the value of freedoms, access to goods and services, access to teachers, various career opportunities, and the desire to plan your vacations, economic stability, and retirement. If you have not written all of these things down, now is the time to do so!

## Historical Context and Adaptation

It's also helpful to assess how the wider sweep of events has shaped us and will continue to. Here are some significant events that have influenced my own past and may impact my future:

(1) Their Great Depression (1929-1938) experiences and Dr. Spock's book (published in July 1946) influenced how my parents (born 1916 and 1919; my father joined the Army Air Corps in 1934; they married in 1940) raised me as an only child; my sole sibling died in 1949 at the age of four days.

(2) The Roswell Incident (1947) altered my childhood. I was born in 1947, right after WWII, and just before “The Roswell Event.” My father “reported viewing and handling space junk.” He was recalled into military service under General Curtis LeMay.

(3) The Cold War (1947-1991) massively derailed my having a stable childhood. I'd experienced 23 relocations to living in different states by age eight as

my father's "boss" was General Curtis ("The Home-Wrecker") LeMay (three actors in the *Dr. Strangelove* movie eulogized his strange personality).

(4) The Vietnam War (1959-1975) greatly influenced my young adulthood as it did most youth at that time (Woodstock, 1969, was one response). My uncle returned from his service in that war with PTSD.

(5) The Space Race (1961- ) heavily influenced my children and me. My father was a NASA employee through projects Apollo, Saturn, and The Space Shuttle.

(6) The US was also involved in 12 other military conflicts.

(7) Economic challenges included 1970s Stagflation, 1981 Recession, 1989 Savings and Loan Crisis, 1999 Y2K, 9/11 Attacks in 2001, 2008 Financial Crisis, and the 2020 Covid Pandemic.

(8) Climate Change began in 1830 but has only recently been considered a Climate Crisis.

Not one of those events did I cause nor was my family and I able to control. Our only option was to adapt: to change our attitude. I feel the same about our future; we must adapt.

## Our Community Journey

Over two decades ago, it felt like I'd already seen and done so much that any prediction for my future mainly was a guess because the chaos that overturned my life was not anything I had control over. Nonetheless, I continued looking for answers, and joining a community seemed like the best option. My husband (then 53) had already—three times—lived in a community. He'd lived off-grid, traveled the world, and was comfortable with all cultures. He is a Libra; he feels in balance when he is living among a group seeking a cooperative living situation.

I (then 46) felt that my military lifestyle prepared me well for an intentional community lifestyle. My skills included caregiving, gardening, cooking, and teaching. I am most at home when being of service to others. We both felt we had skills to offer regardless of not being in our 20s or 30s. We traveled (March 1994-December 1996) to join a community listed in the Communities Directory. We asked several, but "**No, too old**" was always the reply. None inquired about what we felt we had to offer a community in Human Capital.

In January 1997, we bought 1,227 acres of land in Arizona bordering Mexico. We then started our own community. We had up to 11 people sharing that space with us. Each had their own private living space, all eco-friendly. Both of us loved the family-style meals. We had a "Do what needs to be done" song that was our answer to new people asking, "What should I do?" We encouraged people to be creative; some of the projects were just amazing, like a sloped self-watering garden patch. Other ideas were totally insane, like the couple who wanted to "Just live off the land." In the high desert of Arizona, on land stripped of all trees to feed the copper mine furnaces, only cactus and mesquite grew. The climate was harsh; the soil barren; the predatory animals abundant—including extremely deadly

Mojave snakes and rattlesnakes. The 2008 financial crisis forced us to close just after the start of that year. Visitors and prospective community members looked closer to big cities to save on gas prices.

## Serving Those in Need

We found several answers in October 2007 at a conference at Northern Arizona University, including that only 32 percent of Americans believed in climate change, but 59 percent of Mexicans did. Therefore, we moved to Central Mexico to live in an indigenous community. That required bringing in access to the internet and more reliable power. Soon our US-based nonprofit built a 7000-book library, a community center with computer access, and another library.

For five years, we held one annual late-summer fundraising event among us "gringos" to buy school uniforms and supplies (parents' labor, to send one child to school, was an average of 240 hours per child). When we moved there, in 2008, only one of the 450 residents had passed the exam to be allowed to go to high school; five years (2013) later, all of the high-school-age passed the exams. Also, a set of twins that we had personally tutored for over a year won full college scholarships. One was educated in Mexico, the other in the US. They were the first in their family of seven children to graduate from high school or from college. In Ecuador, most adults have a smartphone for WhatsApp messages but do not own computers. Internet cafes are numerous. In-person communication has been nil for two years due to massive Covid restrictions, but the text and WhatsApp messages are alive and well.

Latins have robust family ties. The culture has a passion for holding large gatherings in tight spaces. Homes are small and occupied by several generations as well as extended family members. I suspect that behavior will continue, pandemic or not; the initial outbreak in Ecuador was one lady flying in from Italy and infecting 17 family members in Guayaquil.

Latin children have quickly adapted to computers, but only a few have them at home. They have lost a significant amount of access to technical equipment in the last two years. Most schoolwork is



Photos by Chris Roth



assigned and returned via text messaging or someone walking to a teacher's house to give back homework. Clearly, the use of digital technologies privileged some and disadvantaged others. Our paralegal employee's children are at a great advantage as he is bilingual, so he gathers ideas on coping from both sets of residents. Therefore, his children benefit by having more insight and advantages. Also, I recently upgraded my printer; the old one we gave to his children. Such material exchanges are common between immigrants and local residents.

### What Elders Can Offer before Nature Bats Last

Soon after finishing my postgraduate work there, I came across the work of Dr. Guy McPherson (Nature Bats Last). He is the world's leading authority on abrupt climate change and near-term human extinction. I have followed him for about one decade.

About eight years ago, we found a community village that predominantly raised organic vegetables and domestic animals not fed chemicals. At age 78 and 72, we built an eco-Hobbit House on leased land on a permaculture farm. Our less-than-an-acre homestead is off-grid solar, backed up with wind- and water-generated sustainable on-grid power. We have created several gardens as we have a large mountain spring that feeds our personal, household, and flower and veggie gardens; I raise my own chickens; I cook most foods from scratch; and dedicate myself to my husband, friends, and community members by keeping in mind that "Only love remains." Dr. McPherson has researched scientific peer-reviewed published papers with valid evidence. He has stated that reporting has caused him to predict that by 2026 appropriate habitats for *Homo sapiens* to live and reproduce will likely be nonexistent.



Therefore, we live each day to the fullest! We are both retired teachers with postgraduate awards and experiences. We (aged 81 and 75) enjoy volunteer teaching online and in person. We deeply regret the lost opportunity resulting from age discrimination at the communities we tried to join decades ago. At an average income of \$30 an hour including benefits, had we been allowed to join a community in 1994 and taught only four hours a day until now, that community would have had about \$1,209,600 in free labor: 180 days a year x four hours a day x \$30 an hour x two teachers each day x 28 years. Over a million dollars in labor and that does not consider summers or artistic extras (my husband is a theater professor; I have three years of art training at the college level). Obviously, Human Capital is a significant asset for almost any community!

Our goal in publishing this closing information is to encourage community leaders to consider Human Capital in addition to age when making a decision about who can join and when. On October 25, 2021, I attended FIC's "Aging in Community" virtual conference with a highly qualified presenter, Marianne Kilkenny. I predict that as a result of that presentation, prospective community members who are over the age of 55 will be knocking on community doors and asking for membership. So think twice before saying "No, you are too old" without first asking what they feel that they have to offer a community.

"What is your Human Capital?" might be asked of every prospective member!

Like everyone else worldwide, we will continue to wait and see our future, what communities will look like, and how well we can adapt by changing our attitudes. 🐦

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*The Rev. Jacqueline Zaleski Mackenzie, Ph.D. is a nonprofit administrator, advocate for organic farming, educator, mother/grandmother/wife, social scientist, and author of 14 books. Specializing in Business Systems Management, she earned her M.S. and B.S. from the Florida Institute of Technology. She later earned a Ph.D. and Ed.S. in Special Education, Bilingual Education, and Sociocultural Studies from the University of Arizona. Her passion for protecting our Planet is reflected in her position: she has the highest Clergy Status in The Church of All Worlds. Find out more about her at [www.drworldproductions.com/dr-universe](http://www.drworldproductions.com/dr-universe).*

### Resources:

1. [miami.cbslocal.com/2021/09/22/climate-change-anxiety-study](http://miami.cbslocal.com/2021/09/22/climate-change-anxiety-study)
2. [guymcpherson.com](http://guymcpherson.com)
3. [www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2021/10/27/camp-fire-ptsd](http://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2021/10/27/camp-fire-ptsd)
4. [inconvenientnews.wordpress.com/2021/10/27/opinion-were-facing-a-climate-disaster-why-is-greta-thunberg-hopeful-the-new-york-times](http://inconvenientnews.wordpress.com/2021/10/27/opinion-were-facing-a-climate-disaster-why-is-greta-thunberg-hopeful-the-new-york-times)
5. [www.livescience.com/talking-dinosaur-dont-choose-extinction](http://www.livescience.com/talking-dinosaur-dont-choose-extinction)
6. [www.livescience.com/10-signs-of-climate-change-in-2019.html](http://www.livescience.com/10-signs-of-climate-change-in-2019.html)
7. [www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abe4943](http://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abe4943)
8. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyXtnbaKRQo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyXtnbaKRQo)
9. [www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02990-w](http://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02990-w)

# We Get Up Again

*By See*



**O**n my most recent birthday, my beloved dog of 11 years, Chewy, collapsed in obvious great pain. She had suffered from congestive heart failure for some time and had been on an increasing dose of a couple of different medications. This was not her first collapse, and I'd known for months that our time together was growing short.

Her collapse occurred just as I was in the process of tiling a shower with our maintenance guy. The wall was covered in wet cement and partially tiled in a brown-red waterfall of porcelain and glass; he had no choice except to continue the shower while I knelt, helpless, next to Chewy as she howled in pain and eliminated on the unfinished floor next to the shower.

I carried her home a few minutes later as she was no longer able to walk, though the pain seemed to have subsided. I made a bed for her on my couch and tried to keep her as comfortable as possible while I found a vet who could make a house call to administer euthanasia. A post on Slack and some emails brought me, in short order, a neighbor who emptied my kitchen compost bin, food delivered to my door, and a stream of friends who kept me company almost non-stop for the next 72 hours, including a pair who stayed up with me late into the night and then slept in my bed while I curled up on the couch around my dog.

The following morning, I carried Chewy outside. She had recovered enough to drink a little water, but was refusing food and her medication, and still struggled to walk and eliminate. We set up in the shade on a blanket, where we were joined by a stream of Lost Valley's children, accompanied one at a time by one of the parents. They all wanted to say goodbye to Chewy, and so I sat next to her and answered their frank, innocent questions as directly as I could through my own pain and sadness.

In the late afternoon, my partner arrived from Portland and joined the group at my home as we waited for the vet to arrive. Two of my friends cleaned my home, installed

a portable air filter, and did my laundry so that my partner, who was allergic to dogs, could comfortably spend the night. Chewy was walking some now, though still unsteady, and I was allowing her to eat a steady stream of delicious snacks, to include the meaty knee bone of a cow, cheese, soup leftovers, her own vomit, and, shortly before the vet arrived, the only piece of chocolate she had ever been allowed in her life.

The vet knelt in the center of our spaced-out half-circle on the grass. A dozen of my friends and fellow communarians came to send Chewy off and to comfort me. I knelt next to her, cradling her head as her heart slowed and stopped. I told her I loved her and that I was going to be okay. I cried, and my friends saw me, and held me.

Waiting with me for most of the afternoon had drained a significant chunk of the community's labor resources, but in spite of that a communal meal/potluck had been prepared and we gathered outside together that Friday evening—a din-

ner originally planned to celebrate a couple of birthdays, including mine, which now marked this much more somber occasion. After dinner, a small group of us moved Chewy's body by cart into a part of the forest that already has a couple of graves from the group that owned this property before it was Lost Valley Educational Center. They dug a grave and produced a piece of marble our maintenance guy had spent the day carving with Chewy's name and dates. I said inane things and we buried her. My partner stayed the night; I was joined after he departed the following day by more folks who kept me company late into the evening.

In the months since, I have not felt up to visiting Chewy's grave, though I am glad that it is here on this property. The pain I feel at her loss is difficult to describe and, for those who did not know us together, perhaps unfathomable. This dog traveled with me on two continents and through six states and was with me from my freshman year of college through all of my tumultuous 20s. As a military vet with a number of experiences not atypical of folks with that background, I received support from Chewy that I haven't been able to

replace through other means. The veil between me and the pain of the world seems thinner now. These last months have often felt bleak—my small birthday tragedy complicated, no doubt, by my ongoing experience of living through a pandemic, working outside in a gas mask due to the toxic air quality from nearby fires or hiding inside my small air-filtered bubble through record-setting heat. Add to that the sharp, poignant pain of watching 20 years of military efforts in Afghanistan unravel in a matter of weeks, and the dissension in my community over topics that seem trite in comparison to both my personal struggles and the unfolding global drama of the slow collapse of late-stage capitalism in general and this country I am somehow a citizen of in particular.

Here, there have been no days spent alone and shaking in my pain, but friendship, support, love until I could stand on my own again. No cold and sterile vet's office, but soft green grass, sunshine, and the deepening blue sky. No whisking away of Chewy's body, cremated, disposed of, death kept hidden behind closed doors, but held, carried, and buried by those who loved her, who love me, cared for long past the end. No fairy tales for our children, just the strong, honest beauty of pain and love in loss.

Here is the future, just as it is our past: The world changes, shifts, becomes in many ways harsher and more desperate. We hold our tiny enclaves apart, lights in the darkness burning a bright and different way. We try to share our stories with those we know who live in different ways, and some come to understand, come to see, come to create. We live our lives in our joy, our glee, our celebrations, our triumphs, our milestones—and in our falls, heads bloody, knees scraped, palms pierced with our suffering, our tears falling freely onto the stones.

We get up again.

We get up again! 🐾

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*See grew up in Colorado buried in books and snow. After joining the military and seeing the world, she moved to Oregon to dwell with the last lingering Oak trees of the Willamette Valley. She lives and serves as bookkeeper at Lost Valley Educational Center in Dexter, Oregon with a rotating cast of hippies who light up her life ([lostvalley.org](http://lostvalley.org)).*



Photos by Community of See

# Stumbling Toward Diversity in a Rural Intentional Community

*By Marc Baber*

I live in a rural North American intentional community that is guided by three “pillars” of organizing philosophy: (1) Permaculture, (2) Nonviolent Communication and (3) Sociocracy. The community tends to experience “waves” of interest and residency. In 2020 and 2021, we were honored to have several BIPOC students and residents join us and, although everyone meant well, it ended with most of the BIPOC members leaving dissatisfied with their experiences in the community.

This author has found no data about diversity of the community historically, but I think everyone would agree that the community’s diversity has been less than the diversity of America, as a whole. “Equal Opportunity” alone hasn’t been sufficient to make the group’s diversity more robust. The reasons are a mix of both external and internal influences, some known and some unknown.

External influences include the lack of diversity in our state generally and the historical land-associated trauma experienced by BIPOC, many of whose ancestors were enslaved on rural land, lynched in rural areas, and/or had their homelands or farmlands taken away from them, sometimes by deadly force, sometimes by economic discrimination. In light of this history, romanticized ideals about “living on the farm” and “working on the land” tend to be the preserve of European Americans. Our state’s rural areas tend to be much more conservative than our urban areas. One has to drive past many conservative signs and symbols to get to our community. There are probably also unknown external influences as well.

Internal influences include practices both known and unknown to this author. Of the complaints that have been openly described, there are not yet clear solutions that would be fair to everyone, or the attempts to find solutions have been deemed insufficient or too late. Although there have been rumors of micro-aggressions and allegations of inaccountability, specifics have often not been forthcoming even though the author has been on our community’s equivalent of a grievance committee for nearly a year. An idea that has been offered is that enumerating the problematic behaviors is a burden of emotional work that the community’s BIPOC residents are not obligated to take on. That’s fair enough, but it leaves the non-BIPOC community guessing what behaviors may or may not have been the source of the unstated grievances.

The community was probably naïve about what is realistically required to build diversity in community. The aim of this article is to collect some of the thoughts and experiences that I hope will be processed by the community in order to learn as much as we can from recent experiences, identify mistakes and omissions, and try to prepare better for future efforts to build diversity.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) posits that we are each responsible for our own feelings in response to others’ words and actions. Thus, it is considered unfair criticism to tell another things like:

- Your sexuality makes me feel ill
- Your choice of music makes me sick
- The design of your home is hurtful to me
- When you fail to observe my religious traditions you are attacking me

In other words, what I’m doing is on me and how you feel about what I do is on you. This, in NVC tradition, is deemed a wise delineation of boundaries between people. I am accountable for what I do and you are accountable for how you feel about it (and vice versa). Feelings are seen as subjective and attempts by one person to make their feelings the objective determiner of how another must behave are considered coercive. So,

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“Equal Opportunity” alone hasn’t been sufficient to make the group’s diversity more robust. The reasons are a mix of both external and internal influences, some known and some unknown.

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when a new member of the community, who happens to come from Native American ancestry, claims that others have harmed them and their people by singing a certain song, by living in a Lakota tipi, or by doing a controlled burn of a meadow without respectful ceremony beforehand, these claims can tend to clash with the philosophy of the community. The member claims that other members must be held accountable for these harms. This conceptual discord raises many questions, such as:

- How do we define “cultural appropriation”?
- What policies might we want to enact to reduce harms stemming from cultural appropriation?
  - If we ban certain practices for some people, must we ban those practices for ALL people? If we say only people of certain tribes are allowed to do certain things, do we not open ourselves to claims of discrimination by those who are not from those tribes?
  - How do we determine who is rightfully exercising privileges reserved to members of a tribe and who is not?
  - Can someone with fractional (or no) tribal ancestry choose to express themselves in ways that overlaps with tribal culture and be accepted by the community in a manner similar to freedom of gender expression?
  - If European ancestry members are obligated or expected to do certain things simply because they’re of European ancestry to atone for the actions and inactions of ancestors, is this concept not similar to rigid religious ideas about “original sin” (obligations we are born with)? Do we want to feed that kind of thinking?
  - Who are the rightful authorities for determining when practices are restricted to a certain tribe and what do we do if different tribal authorities appear to disagree?
  - What is the difference between actions that are considered “harmful” and actions that are considered “offensive”?
  - Does the concept of being held “accountable” not imply that there is an agreed-upon standard of behavior or set of rules that one is being held accountable to? Without such rules or standards, can “accountability” have any meaning?

- Do ideas regarding best practices around consent-training have similar implications for the “consent of the governed” in an intentional community?

- Can NVC ideas and ideas related to cultural harms be reconciled?
  - Should NVC ideas be evolved to include some or all of these ideas related to cultural harm with a new formulation of ideas that includes elements from both paradigms?

Another core idea from NVC is that people should be motivated solely by a desire to make their world a better place and not out of fear, shame, obligation, or guilt. When European-ancestry members are asked to undergo training or other “work” to recognize and correct their inherent racism, sexism, genderism, etc., it can often feel like a guilt-trip and a judgment as being stained by an -ism. It might not always be possible to motivate members to participate in such trainings, especially if no one can identify an example of something they personally have actually done wrong. Making progress and remaining aligned with NVC principles may require gently pointing out specific ways that people are falling short in deal-



Photos by Chris Roth

ing with diversity so they can resonate with the needed behavior changes as a way that they can personally make the world a better place. Then, hopefully, they can joyfully do the work to make those changes in themselves. As a community, we probably need to build skills in communicating such shortcomings without shaming members, and in positively reinforcing and socially rewarding people when they make progress. Some might say this is pandering to “white fragility.” I would suggest perhaps it’s really human fragility—none of us enjoy being judged harshly.

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of not shaming, guilt-tripping, or coercing these changes. Our community is not an affluent community. We tend to eat simply. Our housing is small and frequently in need of repairs. Rents aren’t as low as one might expect considering the amenities. Our common spaces have not been as rewarding to members since Covid limited our group activities and shared meals. Suffice it to say that one of the biggest motivating factors for people to live here is that they can feel that they are leading meaningful lives, contributing to the practice of solutions that are needed to make the world a better place. They get to sleep soundly at night knowing they are good people. Any attempt to make people feel like they are actually, in spite of their efforts and sacrifices, bad people strikes at the heart of what keeps this community ticking. It’s going to be toxic to the community if we basically advertise folks should come here, live the good life, and be good people only to tell them they’re inherently bad people after they arrive. Like it or not, the motivation has to be positive. If there are ways to evolve NVC to better overcome obstacles to progress, I’m unsure what they would look like, but I invite people to creatively imagine more and better possibilities.

Part of the dynamic of our community’s 2021 attempts at diversity was that the BIPOC members felt it was necessary to form a “Solidarity Circle” that was not a circle created by the usual sociocratic processes, and to restrict attendance to BIPOC members and recognized/invited allies. The reason stated for keeping the Solidarity group’s meetings closed was to provide a safe container for processing experiences in the spirit of a support group. When the group sought formal recognition at our whole-community meeting, an objection was raised because of the practice of closed meetings. This was most unfortunate and led to hard feelings on both sides of the question. This author believes the “Solidarity Circle” could better have achieved its objectives by having two separate groups: an informal Solidarity Support Group for discussion purposes with closed meetings and without policy-setting authority, plus a sociocratically-sanctioned “Diversity Circle” open to everyone and tasked with formulating new policies to solve problems and make our group more supportive, welcoming, and celebrating of diversity in our community. But all that is water under the bridge for now.

Like NVC, Sociocracy and Permaculture have also fallen under criticism when it comes to supporting diversity. While both systems were developed by European-ancestry men (Sociocracy by Dutch Gerard Enderburg and Permaculture by Australian Bill Mollison) we are not faulting these disciplines for the culture of their founders, but we can see some things are missing that would make these systems more appealing for diverse communities.

Sociocracy tends to support the status quo (which is retained if even one member of a circle has a “paramount objection”) so that attempts to reform, such as those often desired by newer members who may represent new forms of diversity in the community, are at a disadvantage. The problem is painful when reformers represent

diversity and the objector(s) represent a European background. This was the case with the ill-fated “Solidarity Circle.” There’s a huge question here. Should Sociocracy continue to operate exactly as it was originally designed (albeit in a more European monoculture context) or should it be evolved in some way that overcomes problematic situations yet still honors individual rights equally? Is Majority Rule superior to Sociocracy? Might there be some situations in which objections should be appealed and handled in a different or modified process? This author doesn’t know the answers, but I would invite people to work to see if there are better ways.

Permaculture might well be renamed as “Nature as a Second Language” or “Remedial Course in Indigenous Living/Literacy for European-Acculturated Individuals” because many of the key principles of Permaculture are, or were, an integral part of indigenous practice and culture all around the world. A reformulation of Permaculture could better acknowledge these deeper roots and seek to do more than simply adopt practices but also integrate culture by eschewing entirely the European “Man versus Nature” paradigm and supplanting it with more of a “Humans are part of Nature” paradigm.

So, it seems we have a lot of work to do to update the philosophical pillars of our community to better serve diversity in our membership. I hope we can find ways to do this work in joy with a spirit of mutual curiosity, honor, and creativity. 🌱

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# Working Effectively with Especially Challenging Behaviors, Part Two

By *Diana Leafe Christian*

“**W**e thought we were a bad community!”

My heart went out to the woman who blurted this out and her friends who approached me after an evening consultation for their group. Some seemed near tears.

“You are *not* a bad community and you never were!” I said heatedly. “You’ve just been dealing with an exceptionally bad situation!”

Their community had endured seven years of conflict because a member I’ll call Griswald had consistently blocked a proposal everyone else wanted desperately—to install an efficient furnace in the basement of their large home, a former Rust Belt steel baron’s 150-year-old Victorian later converted to apartments. Even though the building had many fireplaces and old-time radiators, every winter the apartments were so cold most of the children caught colds, coughing and sniffing for weeks, no matter that even indoors they bundled up in parkas and hats. Griswald, who lived in a separate, better heated building, adamantly opposed the new furnace each time the community proposed it. He blocked for various reasons: it was unnecessary, it was too expensive, he distrusted its new technology, or for reasons he couldn’t quite articulate and they couldn’t quite understand.

After seven years of sick children and parents in distress, in the last year a newer member discovered a long-forgotten community document revealing that in its earlier years the now 30-year-old community had agreed to a voting fallback option if one or more people consistently blocked a proposal everyone else wanted. But when he shared this, most other members didn’t want to implement what they saw as a non-humane “legalistic” agreement. In their view, blocking a proposal was an almost sacred right in community that they were loath to violate. The newer member, a father with two small children, saw it differently.

Slowly, in meetings with individuals and small groups over a year’s time, he convinced the other families to use their voting back-up for the furnace proposal to break the stalemate and end their winter misery. Finally, in a dramatic meeting, the group brought up the voting fallback after Griswald blocked the furnace again. While he was incredulous and then furious that they’d use the voting fallback, they nevertheless, with great trepidation, voted in favor of buying the furnace and approved the proposal. That winter the apartments were finally warm enough and the parents and children much happier and healthier.

They’d solved one problem, but triggered another. In a rage that his community had bypassed his adamant refusal of the furnace and what he saw as his inviolable right to block, Griswald embarked on a campaign of revenge.

He stopped speaking to everyone. He still collected his food every week from the community pantry but no longer paid for it. Nor did he pay his monthly community dues, vowing he’d never pay them again and no one could make him. Of course he contributed nothing toward the new furnace. Trying to engage him with Nonviolent Communication got nowhere. When they tried to set up mediations he refused.

Griswald complained to the county zoning board and local building department about minor infractions. He reported his suspicions and alleged legal violations to the

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Most community members expect the best in others, and want to give people a second chance. Unfortunately, the Griswalds of the world benefit from this. A community is like a perfectly designed petri dish for these behaviors to bloom and flourish undeterred!

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*These behaviors are often characterized by self-centeredness and entitlement, as demonstrated in Griswald's story. Pictured: Gustave Courbert, Self-Portrait with a Black Dog.*

## Devaluing, Dehumanizing, Invalidating

Psychologist Dr. Ramani Durvasula in her book *Don't You Know Who I Am?* describes people like Griswald as those who “truly believe they’re so special the rules don’t apply to them,” and live with “the childlike conviction that results in genuine surprise and then anger and rage” when they don’t get the special treatment they think they deserve. (See *Book Reviews*, [gen-us.net/DLC](http://gen-us.net/DLC).)

What I call *especially challenging behaviors* are clusters of attitudes and behaviors that can hurt others. Attitudes and behaviors that confuse, alarm, and sometimes devastate fellow community members, like Griswald’s, not just once in a while but consistently, and which can persist for decades. Behaviors like those of people described in the first article in this series (#193, Winter 2021), like Dwight, disdainful and contemptuous to others, blatantly lying, and behaving heartlessly to his friend Charlie. And Mavis, often overbearing and harsh to younger people yet unable to tolerate their attempts to give her feedback. And Olive, aggressive in meetings while believing herself victimized, and demanding obedience from her work exchanger.

While most of us attracted to community are usually cooperative, good-hearted folks, even just one community member with these characteristics can make a huge difference in our sense of peace, safety, and well-being. The actions of people like Griswald, Olive, Mavis, and Dwight can be so hurtful and intimidating we can dread being on committees with them, avoid meetings or shared meals because they might be there, and, when we feel most desperate, even consider leaving our own community and moving away.

Mental health professionals call behaviors like these “narcissistic” behaviors. Dr. Durvasula also uses the term “toxic” behaviors, by which she means experiencing these behaviors in others is usually harmful to us. These are people, she says, who, “through their words, behaviors, conduct, attitude, and emotional expression, consistently devalue, dehumanize, invalidate, and abuse other people.” (See *charts*, “*Narcissistic Attitudes and Behav-*

state health department and county child protection services. The authorities, who for decades had had no problem with the community but were obligated to respond to complaints, visited multiple times to investigate. This not only cost the group time, energy, legal fees, but also embarrassment when the allegations were reported in the local paper.

When community members begged Griswald to stop, he’d retort that they’d brought it on themselves. “You want to hurt this community through some legalistic voting? I’ll show you hurt! I’ll show you ‘legal!’”

This is why I’d been hired as a consultant. That evening several community members told me how guilty they felt in hurting Griswald. Some even believed they deserved his retribution. Yet they also believed they had to use their voting option to get the furnace and stop their suffering. Many felt stuck in this dilemma. They were baffled as to what they could do to end Griswald’s ongoing vengeance.

It was heartbreaking. No community deserved this!

I’d done my best to assure the group that, in my opinion, not only had they done the right thing by finally exercising their voting fallback to get the furnace, but it was the vengeful community member who was in the wrong, not them. And no matter how outraged any individual community member might be, it is right for a group to use its own agreed-on self-governance process to solve its problems. And Griswald, not the community, was responsible for his war of wrath and retribution. And what about the hurt *they* felt? What about the damage *they’d* felt in being miserably cold and with sick children every winter when they had a reasonable solution Griswald repeatedly prevented? Hadn’t he been hurting *them*? And wasn’t he hurting them still with his crusade of punishment?

I was able to convince most community members that evening that this wasn’t normal behavior—this was selfish, offensive, and damaging behavior that had harmed the whole group. It harmed them for the years they couldn’t implement a solution they were desperate for. And Griswald’s retaliation had certainly become abusive and extreme by this time. We talked about what potential consequences they could arrange, including legal measures, to demand that he stop his violations of the community. And if he didn’t, their Bylaws (fortunately) gave them the right to kick him out.



iors,” and “Impaired Empathy,” p. 57, and the section “What’s Going On Here?” in the first article in this series, [gen-us.net/DLC](http://gen-us.net/DLC).)

Psychologist Dr. Craig Malkin, author of *Rethinking Narcissism*, cites psychological research demonstrating that to some degree almost everyone unconsciously (or consciously) perceives themselves as special and unique. According to the research, not only is this normal, there’s evidence we may need to see ourselves this way for happiness and self-confidence. Dr. Malkin calls this normal healthy need “narcissism,” and proposes a 10-point scale of how important it is to us. Self-effacing people who are reluctant to feel special are at 1 on his scale. Most of us are at about 5, he says, enjoying our feelings of specialness but not at other people’s expense. For those in the 8, 9, and 10 range though, the desire to feel special becomes a craving—an addiction—to compensate for feeling empty inside, and as we have seen, with little to no concern for how their words and actions affect others. *These* are the kinds of behaviors we’re exploring in this article series: an attempt to help us recognize these behaviors and protect ourselves and our communities from them. This is what I mean by “working effectively” with these behaviors. (See *Book Reviews*, [gen-us.net/DLC](http://gen-us.net/DLC).)

### Recognizing These Behaviors

However, it’s complex. Most people like Griswald and those noted above exhibit *some but not all* of these behaviors. Moreover, each person’s cluster of narcissistic behaviors can be *different from the cluster of behaviors in others* who also do these behaviors. In each person these behaviors can be *different at different times*, they can *come and go*, and they can be *aimed at some people but not others*.

So it’s not about recognizing various negative attitudes and behaviors that many of us do sometimes, but recognizing certain *patterns of behavior* that are consistent though perhaps intermittent, aimed at some people but maybe not others, and which persist over time.

“Toxic people are not necessarily uniformly toxic,” Dr. Durvasula notes, “which makes it complicated.” Some treat everyone badly, but most people

doing these behaviors, she writes, “are too smart for that.” There are some whom they target, and other people they treat well, either because they want something from them, or because the person’s continued goodwill and support is useful to their purposes. In Dwight’s community, for example, he consistently treated Rose well, while targeting his girlfriend and his business partner. Mavis had her favorites too, yet often bullied young people. Olive treated her work exchangers courteously at first, and some escaped her wrath altogether, yet she singled out some of them for abuse.

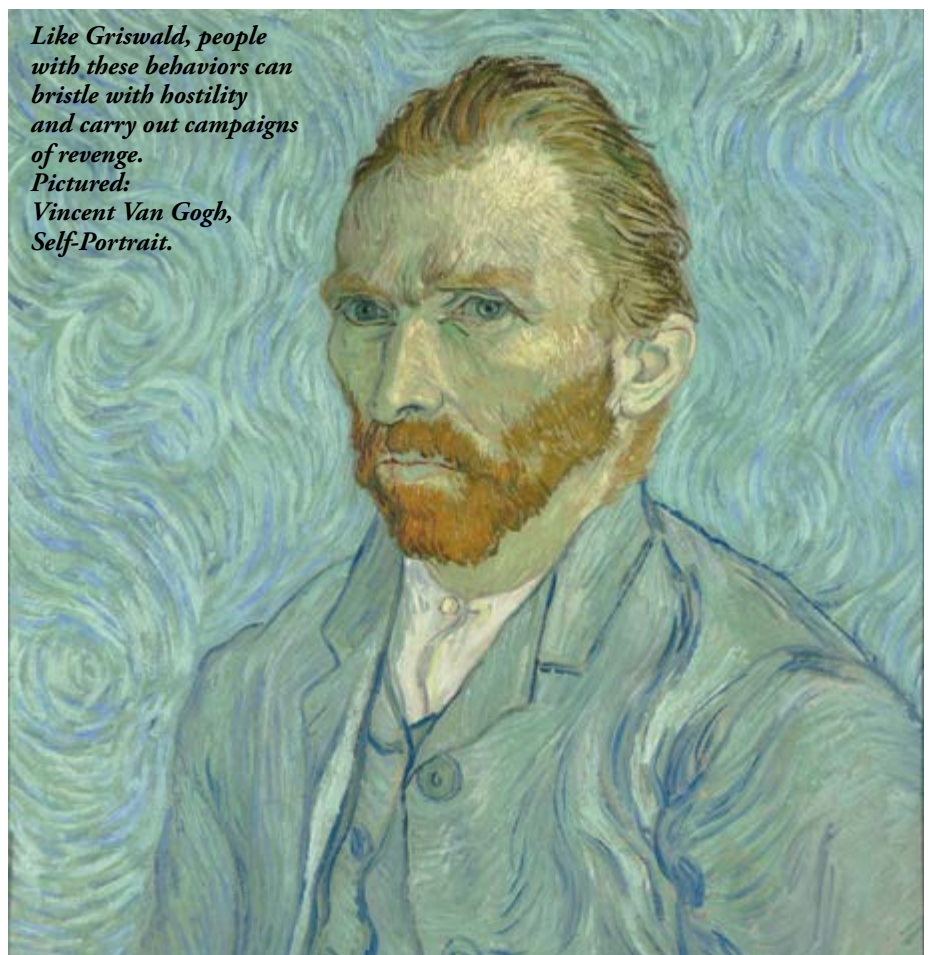
I suggest we *don’t* consider people who do these behaviors as *being narcissists* or as *having narcissism*, even though psychologists use these terms. I suggest instead we consider that people may *do* narcissistic behaviors, rather than that they *are* narcissists. If we know Nonviolent Communication we know better than to consider people as ongoing states of being—people do different things at different times. I believe we are qualified only to observe that some community members may consistently do these clusters of behaviors, not to characterize them as being one thing or another. *We’re* not their therapists! Even just speculating out loud about this can trigger other community members’ negative responses to us.

At the same time, to protect our own feelings of emotional safety and safeguard community harmony, we’ve got to be realistic. For community sanity we need to recognize these clusters of on-and-off hurtful behaviors that persist over the years. We need to understand, as Griswald’s community finally did, that these aren’t *normal* behaviors. And they don’t respond to normal community remedies.

### “Habituation” and Empathy— Why Communities Are Especially Vulnerable

How Griswald treated his community—and got away with it—is a painful example of well-intentioned community members being naïve about, vulnerable to, and harm-

*Like Griswald, people with these behaviors can bristle with hostility and carry out campaigns of revenge.*  
Pictured:  
Vincent Van Gogh,  
Self-Portrait.



*Yet this pattern of behaviors can come and go, vary in intensity, and occur in the presence of some people but not others.*



fully impacted by one member's narcissistic behaviors. Why were they so helpless, and for so long? Partly it was because their classical, traditional consensus allowed one member to stop what everyone else wanted. At the same time, the community became accustomed to—desensitized to—Griswald's selfish, unreasonable behaviors. And when he fiercely rebuked them, many believed him and felt guilty for using their own community governance to solve their community problems.

Psychologists call this blindness "habituation." "Once we get used to a person who is deeply entitled, toxic, or narcissistic, it can become the new normal," Dr. Durvasula writes. As happened in Griswald's community, people who've lived with these behaviors for a long time can lose the ability to recognize them for what they are. They can forget they have the right to ask for—to require—cooperation and goodwill instead!

But it's more than just habituation. It's community culture itself. While most community members value cooperation and good will—especially, psychologists say, people who are empaths or "Highly Sensitive People"—most people who live in community are *more* likely to be vulnerable to these behaviors than others and the most likely to be harmed by them. Most community members expect the best in others, and want to give people a second chance. Unfortunately, the Griswalds of the world benefit from this. A community is like a perfectly designed petri dish for these behaviors to bloom and flourish undeterred!

This series focuses on what we can do to work effectively with these behaviors as individuals and as small groups of members. And as whole communities, *if* our community can generate the courage and political will to take action, as Griswald's community finally did.

## Six Ways We Can Protect Ourselves and Our Communities

People who highly value compassion and detest the callous dismissal of suffering may perceive this exploration of challenging behaviors with an emotional charge on the issue, with a feeling of protection for others, fearing that this article series advocates blaming and vilifying people. I hope you can see that's not the case. I *do not* suggest we criticize or vilify any fellow community members, but rather consider what we can do to protect ourselves and our communities from these behaviors while continuing to feel compassion and understanding for those who do them. Here are some actions we can take, actions that have been "field-tested" by myself and several friends:

(1) *Learn much more about narcissistic behaviors so we'll be more realistic and know what to expect.*

(2) *Lower our expectations* that the person will be able to respond to most requests for empathy, reciprocity, and cooperation. Realistic expectations make us far less likely to feel stunned and baffled, so we won't keep expecting that *this time* the person will feel empathy, *this time* they'll care about our feelings, *this time* they'll have more self-awareness about how they treat us.

(3) *Set limits and boundaries* with people who do these things so their behaviors will affect us far less.

(4) *If you communicate with someone who does these behaviors, make all communications "public"* to the degree you can. Meet with them only in the presence of others. Put phone calls on speaker phone so others in the room can hear, and let them know you're doing this. Share your email exchanges with others in your community, and let them know you're doing this.

(5) *Consider an Inner Ninja technique* for self-protection. This is a simple physical practice that's exceptionally easy to do, takes only half a second, and doesn't negatively affect the other person at all. While it's difficult to understand how it could make a difference, it seems to immediately stop the negative effects of hurtful or manipulative words and energy, whether the person is across the room or even right in front of us. Email me at [diana@ic.org](mailto:diana@ic.org) and I'll send details.

(6) *Get outside healing help* to become far less vulnerable yourself—far less likely to be targeted—from healing professionals: psychotherapists who specialize in helping people affected by this, trauma-healing specialists, spiritual healers, shamanic counselors—whatever works. Outside healing help can assist us in developing a greater inner emotional resilience and self-confidence, fortifying us from within. Some of my friends and I have done this and it helped enormously.

## How We Can Learn More

As described in the first article, my friend Rose was baffled by Dwight's increasing arrogance, and so was his girlfriend, whom I'll call Beth Ann. I knew Dwight and Rose's community well, and I was distressed too. Dwight had always been friendly until he started acting as if I

didn't exist, and even in small groups he'd look right through me as if I were not there, except when he wanted something from me, when he'd be all warmth and smiles again. I later learned this is a typical narcissistic behavior.

While I knew little about narcissistic behaviors at the time, I suggested we learn more. Rose and I ordered books on narcissism. After finishing these we read each other's books and sent them on to Beth Ann, and then shared what we were learning on email. After only a month each of us felt more empowered and less confused. Beth Ann realized she hadn't done anything to make Dwight treat her with contempt. Rose no longer felt anguished and baffled. I stopped thinking Dwight had suddenly perceived a terrible flaw in me. Our little Narcissistic Behaviors Study Group was probably the best thing we could have done.

If Griswald's community had done this (and replaced their classic consensus with modified consensus), they might have gotten warm a whole lot sooner! They probably would have found ways to stop Griswald's revenge earlier and not seen themselves as a "bad community" either.

But, first, please don't be motivated to do this from anticipating that once you better understand why someone is targeting you and treating you badly, finally you'll know just what to say to them so they'll "get it" and start treating you better. After learning more about these behaviors you'll see why *this* doesn't work!

Most resources on this topic focus on the effects of these behaviors on someone in romantic or partner relationships, with one or both parents, in the workplace, or among friends, and while useful, none of these approaches are directly relevant. I recommend both above-referenced books, *Don't You Know Who I Am?* (Post Hill Press, New York, 2019), and *Rethinking Narcissism* (Harper Perennial, New York, 2015). Both offer clear, thorough, basic portrayals of these behaviors and how they can affect us. They cover the overt/extroverted, covert/introverted, and other versions of these behaviors, describe the kinds of childhood trauma that can trigger these behaviors in later life, and offer practical steps to protect ourselves. We can also learn more from

## Narcissistic Attitudes and Behaviors

### More Obvious Overt, Extroverted Narcissistic Behaviors:

*(Grandiosity on the outside, insecurity on the inside)*

- Delusions of superiority; self-centeredness
- Entitlement
- Impaired empathy
- Lying; exaggerating accomplishments
- Rapidly escalating anger; sudden angry outbursts
- Grandiosity
- Craving attention
- Criticizing others
- Mocking or jeering at others
- Invalidating, demeaning, or belittling others
- Bullying others

### Less Obvious Covert, Introverted Behaviors:

*(Insecurity on the outside, grandiosity on the inside)*

- Delusions of superiority; self-centeredness
- Relishing vengeance
- Manipulating others; using people
- Hypersensitivity to criticism
- Projecting their behaviors and attitudes onto others
- "Gaslighting" others (telling someone what they directly observed didn't actually happen)
- Envy others; resenting others
- Limited self-awareness
- Grooming newer or less confident members to be their allies and support their version of reality

## Impaired Empathy

I wrote in the first article that people with these behaviors have little to no empathy, but I was wrong. Until recently mental health professionals believed people with narcissistic behaviors feel little to no empathy because they didn't receive it as a child and so didn't develop it during the short developmental window in childhood for this. They believed people with these behaviors can only simulate the appearance of empathy for short periods, but don't actually *feel* it and cannot simulate it for long because it becomes exhausting to keep up the pretense. But according to more recent research, most people with narcissistic behaviors (in contrast to sociopaths and psychopaths) *do* have the capacity to feel empathy, so psychotherapists now characterize this trait as "impaired empathy" rather than "no empathy." They're capable of "flashes of empathy," says Dr. Malkin, author of *Rethinking Narcissism*, but any capacity to feel empathy and extend it to others is frequently blocked by their (subconscious) preoccupation with their own suppressed emotional distress.

—DLC

abundant free videos on YouTube, especially those of Dr. Malkin (YouTube channel: [Craig Malkin](#)), Dr. Durvasula (channel: [DoctorRamani](#)), and Abdul Saad (channel: [Vital Mind Psychology](#)). The most useful single video I've found is *Oprah's 12 Most Frequently Asked Questions on Narcissism* with Dr. Malkin. (See [Book Reviews](#), [gen-us.net/DLC](#), for more about those books and other useful resources on narcissistic behaviors.)

## What We Can Learn About these (Trauma-Induced) Behaviors

The sooner we learn more the sooner we can revise our assumptions and get more realistic about what does and doesn't work when interacting with fellow community members who exhibit these behaviors.

To start with we can learn that most people who do these behaviors experienced various kinds of trauma as infants or young children, including the trauma of simply

not receiving warmth and empathy from either parent. This can lead to various kinds of challenging behaviors as adults, including but not limited to narcissistic behaviors (including behaviors like borderline, histrionic, and others, or just plain high anxiety), or there can also be no harmful behaviors at all. Experiencing this degree of early trauma usually means the child cannot develop enough empathy to grow into a caring, cooperative adult (see *“Impaired Empathy,”* p. 57). It can trigger suppressed rage and the unconscious belief that the person is somehow defective. People compensate for this by creating what psychologists call a “false persona” of superiority, self-centeredness, and entitlement. This helps them deal with their unending dread, conscious or unconscious, that what they believe is their actual worthless, defective self will be clearly revealed to everyone they interact with.

I think even just having this understanding is enough to trigger compassion for people in our communities who do these things. And...we still need to be realistic. We need to realize, from learning more about this, that most people exhibiting narcissistic behaviors:

- Go into these behaviors as compensations as soon as they feel threatened, consciously or unconsciously. The more threatened they feel, the more intense their behaviors.
- Feel threatened often, and from things that wouldn't threaten others: someone expressing an opinion different from their own or disagreeing with them, no matter how courteously; someone attempting to give them feedback, no matter how courteously; someone not doing what they've told them to do—“disobeying” them. When this occurs the person apparently feels sudden desperate panic, although probably not consciously, and these behaviors come rushing out to protect them. Therefore they:
  - Don't have nor want to have self-awareness about their motives or behaviors.
  - Will not and cannot understand how their behaviors may negatively affect others.
  - Care about their image in the community and don't want other community members to dislike them or not respect them.
  - Do their behaviors privately, one-on-one with the people they target, where no one else can witness them and other community members will be less likely to believe this ever occurs.
  - Or, do their behaviors publicly, often in community meetings, or in emails that invalidate, put-down, or criticize other community members, while not realizing this can trigger others not to like or respect them.
  - Will not and cannot tolerate feedback about their behaviors, contemptuously dismissing it and turning it back on you (“No, *you* do that!”), or reacting with sudden pain or rage as though they'd just been attacked.
  - Like to receive empathy, but will not, and cannot, feel much empathy for others, or feel it for very long.
  - Will not and cannot usually respond to Nonviolent Communication (NVC), talking stick circles, mediation practices such as Restorative Circles, or mediations with outside communities consultants.
  - Soon revert to their usual protective behaviors, even when they do temporarily respond well to one of these modalities.
  - Will not and cannot usually respond to being given “a second chance” (or a third, or fourth, or 18th chance), by people they've targeted in their community, or by the whole community.
  - Will not and cannot apologize to their fellow community members.
  - Do not want and will not consider seeking outside healing help, such as from a therapist, counselor, life coach, spiritual healer, shaman, or any other practitioner of self-understanding and transformation.
  - Probably cannot and will not change, and will mostly likely continue these behaviors for the rest of their lives.
  - Can usually only be deterred in these attitudes and behaviors when people firmly, consistently, and ideally compassionately, set limits and boundaries on them (as Rose did with Dwight in the first article).

Maybe you've tried various remedies in your community: heartfelt conversations,

formal mediations, or giving second chances—but nothing seemed to make any difference. If so, please don't blame yourselves. Please don't think your group wasn't skilled enough or your group didn't try hard enough. The methods that normally resolve conflict in community simply don't work with this pattern of behaviors, for all the above reasons.

## Lowering Our Expectations, Raising Our Emotional Safety

By getting a clearer picture of these clusters of behaviors we can recognize them more easily and develop realistic expectations about them. We can stop hoping the community members who do these behaviors will respond to our requests for empathy, reciprocity, and cooperation. With realistic expectations we're far less likely to be hurt personally, and will not keep expecting that *this time* the person will care about us, *this time* they'll be able to change, *this time* they'll *want* to change. And while there are ways we can work effectively with these community members—which also involve setting limits and boundaries with them—we can do this while still feeling compassion and understanding.

## In Future Articles

In the next article we'll focus on setting limits and boundaries with those who do these behaviors, making our communications with them public, and even seeking healing help to become far less vulnerable to these behaviors ourselves. Future articles will explore how the covert forms of these behaviors affect communities, working with Dr. Malkin's proposed spectrum of these behaviors, and what we can do as small groups of members and even whole communities to create more emotional safety and peace of mind in the communities we love. 🌊

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*Diana Leafe Christian, author of Creating a Life Together and Finding Community, speaks at conferences, offers consultations, and leads workshops and online trainings on creating successful new communities, and on Sociocracy, a self-governance and decision-making method. She lives at Earthaven Ecovillage in North Carolina. See [www.DianaLeafeChristian.org](http://www.DianaLeafeChristian.org).*

## Touching the Dead

*for Norman Glassman*

**T**imidly touching the thin dead  
 shoulder of my long-time neighbor  
 and beloved elder, I can feel  
 in its rigidity what we've lost:  
 not just the flexibility of living  
 muscle and tendon, but the ability  
 to flex it. Whether conscious whim  
 or autonomic reflex, something  
 concealed inside the skin made this  
 bony hinge move on command.  
 What that was nobody knows,  
 the name he used merely one more  
 pseudonym for mystery, but the blue eyes  
 swiveling in his skull shot a beam of it  
 wherever he glanced, his voice  
 scattered its shrewd humor and singular  
 opinions like breeze-borne seeds,  
 his hands on the bulldozer's joystick,  
 the screwgun and circular saw  
 built a life-size model of a vision  
 it alone could see. And how many  
 visions outlive the visionary  
 in the end? The reinforced concrete  
 and lumber he taught to speak  
 stand sturdily over him while he lies here  
 silent. The trees and paths and gardens  
 he set free from trash and kudzu  
 breathe in the dark around his deathbed  
 like memories that obstinately live on  
 in the world of substance when all those  
 dancing images in the brain finally  
 flicker out. One by one his neighbors  
 drop in one last time to say goodbye.  
 The closed eyes gaze off  
 in the direction he was looking  
 when he finally forgot  
 how to breathe, or maybe just  
 why—our only clue  
 where he's headed from here.

## The Object of the Game

**G**ood morning, contestants!  
 Welcome to the show.  
 You have each been given  
 an infinite amount of love  
 and a limited supply  
 of hours, minutes, and seconds to play.  
 The object of the game  
 is to give away as much as you can  
 to as many other contestants  
 as possible  
 before the bell rings and you  
 go home. You'll each win  
 many prizes along the way,  
 but winning prizes is  
 the object of some other game,  
 you'll have to give  
 each prize away to win the next,  
 and the game isn't over  
 until everybody wins.  
 Got it? Good. Get ready:  
 start when you hear the sigh of lust  
 in the darkness  
 and feel a sudden  
 tug on your bellybutton.  
 Good luck!

## Lightning's Compass

**W**ith every flash and flicker of the sky,  
 I glimpse another few steps  
 of the trail back to my tent,  
 this slow pilgrimage between the trees  
 without a flashlight—  
 fork to the left, jog to the right,  
 slippery downgrade, low-hanging branch—  
 like my life sometimes,  
 the chain of epiphanies lighting up my path  
 and the pitch-dark  
 between

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

## Praising the Rain

I hear it coming  
a minute or two before it arrives,  
like stampeding buffalo  
off in the distance, heading my way  
from some long-vanished  
Ghost Dance prairie  
as I sit concentrating, distracted,  
here on my screened-in back porch—  
and then suddenly  
it's here, shaking the ground  
like the pounding hoofbeats  
of a herd of caribou  
migrating right through  
my quiet neighborhood, dividing  
to thunder past my house  
and across the Arctic tundra of my roof,  
invisible in the dustcloud  
of mist and humidity they raise  
behind them—  
like an explosion of small  
flashing wings, a whirlwind swarm  
of Old Testament locusts  
devouring every blade and leaf  
of thought or memory in my head  
for a brief and endless,  
roaring, howling  
trance-like span of time—  
and then just as suddenly  
it's gone, I hear it galloping on  
to the next neighborhood, and then  
those same three musical  
notes again—

All through the peak  
of the downpour,  
that three-note birdcall never stopped  
praising the rain

## O Loveliest

O f blossoms is  
a human countenance  
opening to astonishment  
or agony, the flush  
of anger or the flinch of fear:  
and loveliest of all Earth's  
flowering creatures is laughter,  
the tight bud breaking into  
helpless music  
as all around that shining face  
new blooms break out—

## Given

Before forgiveness  
came simply  
giveness—as light  
fills all available space,  
making emptiness  
visible, outlining the edges  
of the void, until  
even the shadows owe it  
everything—  
So which came first,  
the darkness or the dawn?  
The wholeness  
or the hurt?

## Human Error

"In your silence God's silence ceases."  
—Yogananda

There comes a time  
when the best I can offer the world  
is my silence

The omnipresence of God  
rivaled only by the ubiquity  
of television—

The omniscience of God  
neck and neck with the databanks  
of surveillance—

The omnipotence of God  
overcome in the end  
by the sheer stubborn arrogance  
of human error—

There comes a time  
when the best I can offer the world  
is my silence

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THE REACH DEADLINE FOR ISSUE #195 - Summer 2022 (out in June) is April 29th, 2022.

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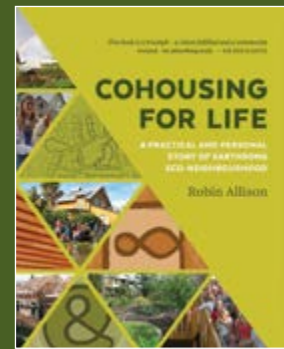
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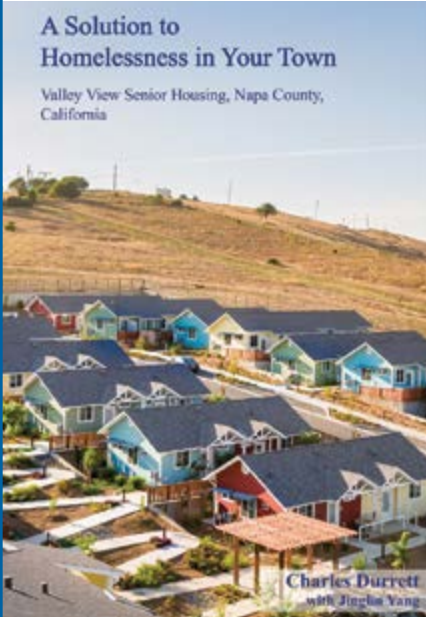


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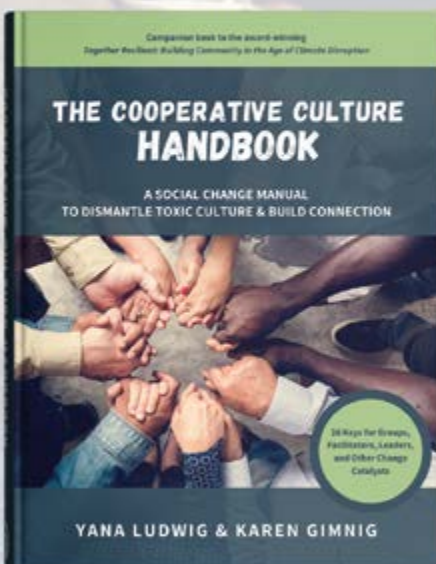
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## The Two Realms of Community

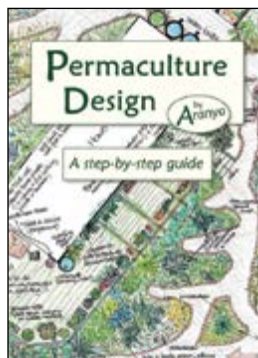
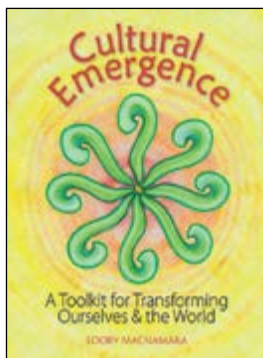
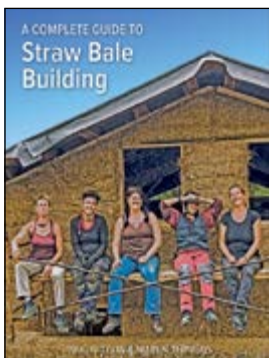
(continued from p. 68)

wards a healthy and sustainable survival. Some of those communities are living units; others are drawn together by connections that are social, spiritual, and professional. Putting them together depends on our stubborn resilience, outsized creativity, and ability to make systems work for a future our children will live in. 🌱

*Paul Freundlich has been an active participant and creator in the development of cooperative, communitarian, and sustainable alternatives for 60 years. See exemplars.world and past issues of COMMUNITIES for more of his writing. He continues to serve on the Board of Green America as its Founder and President Emeritus.*

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# The Two Realms of Community



Chris Roth

Society routinely refers to “communities” of bankers, businesses, and nations whose connection is primarily functional, while being somewhat embarrassed by an actual **sense** of community which makes it worthwhile. As a result, we often awkwardly hop from one assumption to the other, without even knowing it.

In the realm of “functional” community, at every level from Village on up, complex systems of protocols govern our passage and determine much of our opportunities. The key modalities are compliance and rewards. We pay our dues and expect a reasonable return on investment.

Then there is the experience of living, working, and playing connections which are reinforced by expectations of mutuality and cooperation—the realm of Community. The key modalities are intention and participation. In this realm, we experience a flow to life, which intention releases and participation affirms.

Most of the 7.9+ billion humans on the planet, to varying extents, live in both worlds.

This distinction is especially relevant to the vision of community this magazine seeks to support—a vision that does better when **intention and cooperation are consistent with citizenship and economics**, producing a congruence that benefits both.

What accommodations and synergies can be accomplished when the **values** of community are integrated into the **functionality** of community? How might that happen?

Take a neighborhood in a town or city: Besides sharing a zip code, is there a set of connections which invigorate and enhance life? A local pub, a food co-op, an elementary school, churches, green spaces? Do folks recognize each other on the street and indulge in simple acts of kindness?

Take a professional association, a Volunteer Fire Department, elected officials, or a labor union: Is there a concern greater than self-interest; an awareness of the role the institution might play in creating good will? Can modes of cooperation honed in intentional communities modify behaviors in functional communities?

In my local area, a federally qualified Community Health Center with a built-in sliding scale for treatment serves as an anchor that extends well past delivering quality primary care. In 2001, based on decades of building collaborative relationships, our local hospital

scored a million-dollar federal grant to improve access to care. It was natural to share conception and execution with the CHC. The initiatives we developed formalized reduced-cost access to specialist medical, dental, and behavioral healthcare and medications. As Director of the grant, I helped create a national support organization for community access, Communities Joined in Action. (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEXuiBzYr8A>.)

Over the years I’ve noted the widening ripples emanating from individuals trained by their experience in intentional communities, cooperatives, and service institutions such as Peace Corps and AmeriCorps. One of my good friends, Roger Landrum, from his own Peace Corps days, devoted his life-work to the context of National Service which could help bridge the gap between cultures and disparities. Another friend, Joan Bavaria, turned her investment company into a worker-owned social investment initiative, Trillium Asset Management, then went on to lead a cohort of environmental and social investment organizations, the CERES Coalition, to successfully institute corporate sustainability reporting from “never happens” to a usual business practice. Ann Evans took her food co-op organizing experience into public office as Mayor of Davis, California, and established a hugely playful and long-lasting Farmers’ Market. Jim Gibbons built a successful health insurance company, Consumers United, pioneered unisex rates, then gave away most of his ownership stock to his workers, and along the way supported many communitarian projects, including my development of Co-op America.

The accumulation of technologies, resources, and the momentum of wealth is staggering. We know that it is possible to make government and commerce responsive to the values of community and cooperation. Individuals trained by such experiences are likely to have their assumptions and expectations changed. Yet even as we respect that we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before, it would be naive to ignore that we are dancing in dangerous times—with the evidence everywhere to see, from denial and extremism in public dialogue to rising economic disparities, racism, and climate chaos.

If there is hope, it is that while billionaires target outer space, intentional communities are pursuing more modest goals to

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# New Back Issue Sets Available

To celebrate COMMUNITIES' 50th anniversary, we've compiled sets of all of our in-print back issues for which we have at least a dozen copies in stock. We are offering three entirely distinct sets. Two of them are available in very limited quantity because of low issue inventory, so if you're interested, please act soon.



**BACK ISSUE SET A:** COMMUNITIES #s 143, 147, 148, 150, 152, 154, 155, 156, 157, 159, 160, 162, 163, 167, 168, 171, 172, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193 (37 issues total, from the years 2009-2021) – 21 sets available.

**BACK ISSUE SET B:** *Communitas 1, Communitas 2, COMMUNITIES* #s 3, 8, 26, 28, 39, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 57, 66, 67, 70, 71/72, 82, 83, 105, 117, 138, 139, 140, 142, 144, 145, 146, 148, 151, 161, 164 (32 issues total, from the years 1972-2014) – only 8 sets available.



**BACK ISSUE SET C:** COMMUNITIES #s 79, 80/81, 83, 84, 85, 86, 90, 92, 93, 94, 96, 97, 100, 101, 102, 110, 112, 115, 118, 124, 125, 126, 136, 137, 141 (25 issues total, from the years 1993-2008) – only 8 sets available.

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## Your Support Is Essential

COMMUNITIES is far from a conventional magazine. This is fortunate, as many conventional magazines have gone out of business this millennium. We benefit from a steady influx of new readers, drawn to the search for and exploration of collective solutions. Even more, we benefit from having long-term, dedicated readers, who appreciate what a cohesive magazine issue offers—an experience not easily replicated through blog posts or other quick-consumption internet-mediated formats. COMMUNITIES is slow media, not quick media: six months go into the creation of every quarterly issue, and we hope it shows.

As long as COMMUNITIES has a role to play, we want it to endure. You—our readers—are the ones who make this possible. You provided the support we needed a few years ago to make the transition to a new publisher—GEN-US—and you continue to provide the support necessary to stay in publication. Many of you make the choice to subscribe at Supporter or Sustainer levels, and also give additional donations, sometimes three- or four-figure donations, because you believe in and appreciate what COMMUNITIES is and does.

It is a community, not a commercial undertaking, which is why we have been able to survive, continuing to reach everywhere from Ivy League libraries to backwoods off-the-grid homesteading collectives, from Communal Studies scholars to community-seekers, from long-term communitarians to brand-new intentional groups, from neighborhood activists to global networkers. Even though the numbers of international subscribers are modest, we reach every inhabited continent. And we not only produce new content every quarter, but also steward five decades' worth of material: close to 200 back issues which are available in digital form to anyone who becomes a subscriber and has access to the internet.

Please help keep COMMUNITIES alive through your subscriptions ([gen-us.net/subscribe](http://gen-us.net/subscribe)) and donations ([gen-us.net/donate/magazine](http://gen-us.net/donate/magazine)). All donations are fully tax-deductible. And please consider subscribing not only for yourself but for those you love who have interest in community, cooperation, and a livable planet.

Please also consider submitting writing, photos, and/or artwork ([gen-us.net/submit](http://gen-us.net/submit)), advertising your community, business, programs, or projects ([gen-us.net/advertising](http://gen-us.net/advertising)), and helping us spread the word about COMMUNITIES (contact [editor@gen-us.net](mailto:editor@gen-us.net)). Thanks again for joining us!

—Chris Roth

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I love COMMUNITIES magazine. Deciding to be communal is the best decision I've ever made in my life. COMMUNITIES has been there from the beginning.

—Patch Adams, M.D.,  
author and founder of the Gesundheit Institute

COMMUNITIES has become one of our go-to sources for thought-provoking pieces about people opting out of the rat race and living life on their own terms.

—Christian Williams, Editor, Utne Reader

Each issue is a refreshing antidote to the mainstream media's "me, me, me" culture. COMMUNITIES overflows with inspiring narratives from people who are making "we" central to their lives instead.

—Murphy Robinson,  
Founder of Mountainsong Expeditions

Community has to be the future if we are to survive. COMMUNITIES plays such a critical role in moving this bit of necessary culture change along.

—Chuck Durrett,  
The Cohousing Company

For more than 40 years COMMUNITIES has done an outstanding job of promoting the communitarian spirit as well as serving intentional communities and other groups coming together for the common good.

—Timothy Miller,  
Professor of Religious Studies, University of Kansas

For many years we've been associated with and have strongly supported COMMUNITIES because we're convinced of its unique contribution to the communities movement in the United States and the world.

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

COMMUNITIES has been important to me ever since I began researching intentional communities back in 1980.... The Editors have always been willing to include critical articles which challenge accepted norms.

—Dr. Bill Metcalf,  
Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia

COMMUNITIES is an invaluable resource.

—Professor Emeritus Yaacov Oved, Tel-Aviv University

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