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# COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

Summer 2022 • Issue #195

## Place and Planet

**Standing in the Fire**  
**Sense of Place and Land Back**  
**On Placemaking and Butterflies**  
**Community Building in Paradise**  
**Back to the Land in Maniac Valley**



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# PLACE AND PLANET



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Photographer Graham Ellis' daughter and her friend walk along the half-mile trail across the 1955 lava flow next to Bellyacres' property. "It took pick axes, sledge hammers, hundreds of wheelbarrow loads of red cinders, and thousands of

hours of back-breaking work to complete the project over several years. We built two platforms on the walk overlooking the Pacific Ocean, and conducted two weddings out there. The lava trail gives us and visitors a sense of place—right in the midst of Madam Pele's creation." (See article, p. 18.)

# COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

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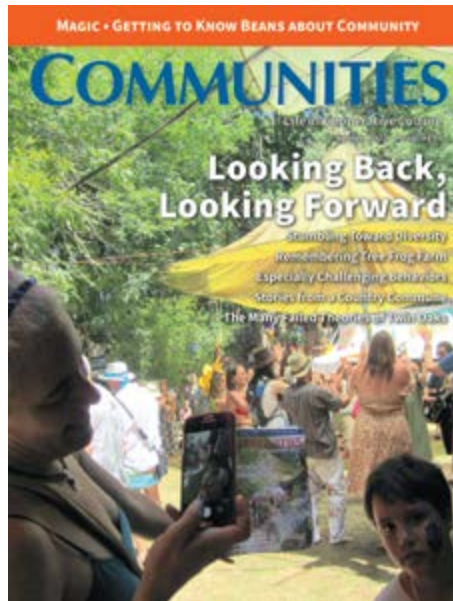
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## Letters



## Living *In* the Present— Not *For* It

Hi Chris,  
Your reflections on time past, present, and future (“Notes from the Editor: Questions in Middle Age,” issue #194, pp. 6-7) recalled to mind an article I once wrote called, “Live *in* the Present—Not *for* the Present.” The New Age concept of “living in the Now” contrasts tellingly with the Native practice of considering how our actions affect the seventh generation to come. Our current actions as a species cast doubt on whether we’ll even be around for that many more. The underlying philosophy of our consumer society is to live *for* the present, gobbling up past and future in our

quest to unconditionally enjoy the Now. Living *in* the present, on the other hand, doesn’t prevent us from planning wisely for the future or valuing the lessons of the past, but does allow full enjoyment of this precious fleeting moment. In fact, I think it enhances our enjoyment of Now with the poignancy of memory and the satisfaction of responsibly passing on what we have received.

Stephen Wing  
Atlanta, Georgia

## Lessons from Twin Oaks

When I saw, on the cover of the Spring 2022 issue, the article title “The Many Failed Theories of Twin Oaks,” I was intrigued—first, because I lived at Twin Oaks for three and a half years in 1982-85, and second, because it sounded kind of harsh toward a place that is still going strong after 55 years, almost as long as I’ve been alive.

That Keenan could list an even number of failures and successes seems to me a decent balance, especially given that the successes demonstrate a resilience, wisdom, and humility that allowed for learning from said “failures.” As he wrote at the end of the article, an enduring culture has been created, where everyone is taken care of, children are raised to be healthy, and equality and empowerment are supported. That Twin Oaks shields its children from any pressure to represent community life says volumes about understanding the importance of nurturing the individual as much as the community: it doesn’t exist to prove anything to others but to provide a good life for its members.

I could say that my own “failures” led to leaving TO after only a few years but they weren’t actually failures: they were me, age 20-24, trying to figure out how to be myself and be in the world and find safety and trust. I could say I wish I’d been more grounded, more self-aware, but living there helped me begin that process more than anything else up to that point. In whatever ways I was not capable at the time of diving deeper into community life, or TO was limited in how it could help me, I have always been so glad I lived there and I am also really glad it has endured so well.

As for Keenan’s parting question, “But are people happier here, living in community? We don’t have clear evidence,” I would reply: Life isn’t about always being happy, feeling fulfilled, not having disagreements. And we can—indeed, must—treat people with respect even when we don’t agree with them, and treat ourselves with compassion when we’re in a rough spot. The older I get, in general the less complicated things really seem to be: what’s most basic and important is showing up, paying attention, being present,



open, and kind; learning how to talk with each other when there are conflicts or challenges, which of course there will be. But whether on our own or in relationship with others, I believe we do the best we can with what we know at the time, and if we learn as we go along, then I'd say we're doing pretty darn well.

Jenny (Bauer) Chapin, aka Calgary  
Brattleboro, Vermont

## Especially Helpful Articles

I would like to draw COMMUNITIES readers' attention to two recent articles. Both of them deal more realistically with a source of deep and sustained community conflict than any articles I've seen in the past. They are Parts One and Two of "Working Effectively with Especially Challenging Behaviors," in your Winter 2021 and Spring 2022 issues (#193 and #194) [also available at [gen-us.net/DLC](http://gen-us.net/DLC)].

What can happen when members introduce their own insecurities (with narcissistic compensations) into a group's decision-making process? How can communities respect the people who do this, while preserving their own sanity *and* the process, by setting firm healthy boundaries?

I think that only as seasoned a voice-of-experience as the author, Diana Leafe Christian, could produce a guide which combines psychological insight with practical advice on such a fraught topic. As your readers may know, Diana wrote the books *Creating a Life Together* and *Finding Community*, and is a former editor of COMMUNITIES magazine, so she's well-qualified to address this topic.

I've lived in communities most of my adult life. Despite plenty of experience with hijacked group process, the first two articles in this series have already provided me with fresh and much deeper insights into intractable conflicts within my own community.

Until now, when a community member acted out with "Especially Challenging Behaviors," whole communities have been shocked and held hostage (think "deer in the headlights"). Now, we are finally gaining new tools to understand what's *really* going-on...and perhaps deal with it better.

Many thanks for taking your readers to new, more intimate, more insightful realms of resilient community. I can't wait to read the follow-up articles in this series!

Name Withheld

## Postal Fiasco

Hi Chris,  
Yesterday [April 2, 2022, nearly eight months after its mailing—Ed.], I received the Fall 2021 issue. It was in a USPS envelope saying it was damaged in handling by the postal service. It said, "We are aware how important your mail is to you. With that in mind, we are forwarding it to you in an expeditious fashion." !!!!!!!

It is all ripped up and missing everything up to page 9. Seems to me the USPS owes COMMUNITIES at least a refund for all the money you spent on a service that you did not receive! [Editor's Note: dozens of copies of the Spring 2022 issue, including Amy's, also arrived ripped up, as only the cover, or not at all. Unfortunately, USPS offers no refunds or credits on lost or damaged bulk-mailed items. See the back cover for what we are doing to prevent a recurrence of these problems.]

And thank you for re-sending me the Spring issue. It arrived in one piece in your envelope.

Peace,  
Amy Donohue  
Airville, Pennsylvania



Join the conversation for an inside look at the **beautiful & messy** realities of creating and sustaining community.

Enjoy conversations with:

- Dave Henson
- Lee Warren
- Yana Ludwig
- Clifford Paulin
- Jonah Mesritz
- Diana Leafe Christian
- Sky Blue
- Laird Schaub
- Alyson Ewald



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WITH REBECCA MESRITZ



### 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.

# Place and Planet, Unplugged



Chris Roth



We are each in community all the time, though we are not always conscious of it or intentional about it. We are always in relationship to both Place and Planet, even if we are oblivious to these relationships as we go about our daily lives.

As a high school freshman soon after the US Bicentennial, I myself was in the fairly large, nationwide community of people who came home from school and watched “All in the Family” reruns and “The Gong Show” on television while snacking on mass-produced packaged food of questionable nutritional value.

I was not exactly tuned into my local place in those moments; instead, I was making the easiest choices available to someone confronted with sudden feelings of isolation experienced when coming home to a mostly-empty house. The great majority of other middle-class US schoolchildren were doing the same thing at the time, in one way or another: getting practice for being ongoing consumers of entertainment and of goods. We were in training to feel equally at home anywhere, with piped-in distraction and empty calories dulling awareness of our deeper needs for connection. Our “place” was American consumer culture, even if it was being lampooned to some extent by the shows we were watching—their segments sandwiched, of course, between commercials.



All this changed in my sophomore year, when I joined the cross-country team, and thus discovered both a real-life “community” of peers after school, and a revived connection to place that had grown dormant in the transition from a childhood of playing outside to an adolescence that encouraged me to stay inside. I fell in love with long-distance running, and fell out of love with television, packaged snacks, and commercial culture in general. Repeatedly, the midst of a run would bring what felt like whole-body revelations: “Trees Are Alive.” This was no longer just a technical “fact,” intellectually grasped at best; it seemed more like a life-altering spiritual awakening. Trees were now beings I felt kinship with, especially when immersed in the freedom of running, getting to know my place much more intimately and viscerally than was possible from within a building or a vehicle.

Television now appeared to be a waste of time, a huge distraction, an affront to the life found all around us. It seemed to transfix people and keep them from actually relating to one another or to the greater living world. I started studying the effects of all of our choices—our food, our transportation habits, what we used in our daily lives—and changed my own choices accordingly. I developed an interest in local wild plants and Native American lifeways. Pursuing these interests sometimes felt lonely, as I often seemed to be marching to my own drummer amidst people who instead were mostly embracing rather than rejecting an automobile-centric, consumeristic life of constant distraction from the living world. Even many of my cross-country teammates seemed prone to this when not running.

Relief came in noticing that others too had observed how empty this “community” of American life had become: *Advertising signs they con / You into thinking you're the one / That can do what's never been done / That can win what's never been won / Meanwhile life outside goes on / All around you.*<sup>1</sup> Along with tuning into that “life outside,” I started searching for kindred spirits, purchasing *A Guide to Cooperative Alternatives* soon after its publication (see page 68 in this issue). Living in respectful, deeply-connected relationship with place, living responsibly in relation to the planet as a whole (its peoples, other creatures, lands, waters, air), and connecting with like-minded people to combine those two impulses in cooperative endeavors, coalesced over time into the impulses that would guide my life choices.

Fast forward to today: what are the distractions that now keep us from connecting to both Place and Planet? Nearly half a century later, is there anything keeping our attention away from all that is around us, and from recognizing the effects of our actual moment-to-moment actions on the planet as a whole? Even for those of us who have forsworn television (as many communitarians have), does anything else lead to similar feelings of disempowerment or separation from our surroundings? Was another sage prophetic in singing (back in 1996): *There'll be one corporation selling one little box / It'll do what you want and tell you what you want and cost whatever you got / But where is Maria?*<sup>2</sup>

In today’s world, there are no easy answers. In order to engage with society, we all find ourselves using tools about which we may feel ambivalent. But only our awareness and intentionality can limit their ability to become distractions and dependencies. For thousands of years we have done without most of them, relying more on ourselves, our communities, and our places. I believe we need to spend more time doing that, even if just in limited blocks—to see what we may be missing, and what may be missing us.

Both Place and Planet need us, and we need them (if not, in all cases, Maria). I hope the articles which follow can help guide us in answering that call. 🌱

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*Chris Roth edits* COMMUNITIES.

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1. *It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)*, Bob Dylan, © 1965 by Warner Bros. Inc.; renewed 1993 by Special Rider Music.  
 2. *Where Is Maria*, Greg Brown, © 1996 by Red House Records Inc.



## Diana Leafe Christian Basic & Advanced Sociocracy Trainings

**“I love this course. Who knew governance could be so fun!”**

—Jeff Conklin, Riversong Cohousing,  
Eugene, Oregon.

**“I love how Diana presents her Sociocracy Course! She’s super-clear, organized, has incredibly thorough preparation, and she’s so down to earth, fun, engaging, and easy to connect with.”**

—Phoenix Robbins, Aptos Beloved  
Community, California

**“I highly recommend this course for effective, transparent, non-hierarchical governance and decision-making. While it requires significant time, we got a huge payoff — better decisions, a high level of engagement, and meetings that are both productive AND fun!”**

—S. Denise Henrikson, ecoTHRIVE  
Housing, Seattle, Washington

**“Learning sociocracy in Diana’s course and using it in our urban ecovillage has easily been the biggest catalyst to help our community thrive. I attribute this mostly to Diana’s deep experience and knowledge of sociocracy as used in intentional communities, while her charm and teaching style kept the process fun, light, and engaging.”**

**I was involved in two communities that failed. In Diana’s course I often had the insight, ‘Oh! We could have saved so much wasted time if I’d known *this* earlier!’ or ‘Wow, now I know how to avoid *that* issue in the future.’**

**I believe this course can help any group bypass the typical difficulties that challenge communities, and experience effective, enjoyable community governance instead!”**

—Jordan Lindsay, Herding Cats Collective,  
Calgary, Alberta

**More Info:**

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



*Fire and chainsaws,  
tools of mass restoration.*



# Standing in the Fire (actually, lighting it)

*By Abeja Hummel*

*We envision a world where culture is restored as the reciprocal and collaborative relationship between people and the land.*

—Emerald Earth Sanctuary Vision

*Emerald Earth Sanctuary supports a resident community that cares for this land and holds it as sanctuary for education and cultural transformation.*

—Emerald Earth Sanctuary Mission

Look around the circle gathered in anticipation—young children and old hippies, energetic teens and their less-energetic but still vital parents, firefighters and bodyworkers, neighbors and friends. Memories of suffocating smoke from fast-moving, record-breaking deadly fires nearby haunt all of us and bring us here together today to, literally, fight fire with fire.

We've been preparing to set fire to our meadows and forests for many years. Now that the rainy season has come and the threat of wildfire abated, we begin the process of "Prescribed Burning." Whereas Native Californians would light all these hills on fire in the fall before the rains, poor forest management that has allowed a massive build-up of fuels, combined with drought and the heating and drying effects of climate change—not to men-

tion European ideas of private property and "permanent" structures—make this impossible.

This is, of course, an oversimplification on many levels. Burning is not just about fighting fire, it is about the overall health of the land in these Northern California forests, woodlands, and savannas that evolved with fire, a.k.a. "fire-adapted-ecosystems." Of course, if fire is an integral part of the ecosystem, then so are humans, the ones that set the fires. Their culture, which, for millennia, passed down the knowing of how and when and where to burn, is a keystone in these ecosystems.

A search for descendants of the original inhabitants of this land has left us with nothing but a hole filled with questions and vague records of being marched away to Round Valley, about 90 miles



away. The closest local Native Californians I've spoken to all say, "Boonville? No, those weren't my people." They were maybe cousins, surely intermarried, but spoke a different language and had their own unique knowledge and relationship with this exact piece of land. Given the stories that have survived from neighboring tribes, one can only assume the worst about what happened to them.

Can a group of mostly European settlers' descendants, on a land whose indigenous people were slaughtered around 150 years ago, find a way to live in right relations with the earth? Can we begin to create culture that may, eventually—even if not in our lifetime—truly fill the role of humans in this environment? What is the appropriate, respectful way to receive and use knowledge from nearby indigenous wisdom keepers whose cultural practices are likely similar to those of the original inhabitants of this land?

We strive to stand in this vision, as the local fire chief talks us through the burn plan for the day—maps printed out, all contingencies accounted for, organized roles, drop points, units, data. Very technical, very scientific. Lots of acronyms. This, for now, is our "ceremony." Not at all a "Cultural Burn" as the native Pomo people would have performed, but a "Prescribed Burn," conducted in the Cartesian worldview, courtesy of European settlers, giving us an unmerited sense of safety and control. I keep my songs and prayers to myself, this time, and hope that we can evolve this process, this culture, as we deepen our relationship to fire on this land.

Committing to my personal mission and the community's stated goals to deepen and renew our relationship with the land, I pictured frolicking and celebrating, protecting and treading lightly, in bare feet, flowers in our hair. A collective endeavor that included all the beings of the Earth. I never could have imagined

then the chainsaws, heavy machinery, and diesel fuel that would become the tools of our tending. And I certainly wouldn't have dreamed that I could enjoy it so much! This commitment to and exploration of right relations has brought us to tractors and sweat lodges, TEK (Traditional Ecological Knowledge) and modern science, foresters and loggers, bioblitzes and birdsits.

Today I hold the "kestrel," a highly sophisticated technological device oddly named for a small, strikingly-colored local raptor. The "kestrel" measures air temperature, wind speed and direction, RH (relative humidity), and god knows what else, and then instantly calculates a PIG (Probability of Ignition)—the number we look at to decide if it's the right time to light the fires. Too low and the fuels won't burn well, too high and it's too dangerous to light. For millennia, Native Californians safely burned this land without this technology, but I'm certainly grateful to have it.

I don't want to fully throw out technology and Cartesian science, but I long for a deeper, non-reductionist relationship to the world. My beloved teacher Joanna Macy says, "The conventional notion of the self has narrowed the horizons, both of our cognition and our compassion." She speaks of a shift in consciousness she calls the "Holonc shift," which brings with it a recognition that we each are a unique, small, utterly essential part of the larger whole system. We are not solid, permanent, and unchanging, but rather patterns that perpetuate themselves. Working in teams, in community, I sometimes almost feel that shift in consciousness. It's going to take work!

"All living systems—whether organic like a cell or a human body, or supra-organic like a society or ecosystem—are holists. That means they have a dual nature: They are both wholes in themselves and, simultaneously, integral parts of larger wholes.... At each holonic level new properties and new possibilities emerge

Eden Kellner



*Abeja and drip torch.*



*Fire doing its job.*

Abeja Hummel



that could not have been predicted.”—Joanna Macy.<sup>1</sup>

We break into teams and head out with our walkie talkies, hand tools, drip torches full of gasoline and diesel, and backpack sprayers full of water. We start slowly, carefully, unsure despite the encouragement of the more experienced crew leaders. I light my torch and drip fire from its tip into the dry leaves and branches of the oak woodlands where we have limbed up and even cut whole trees to bring the fuel load down. Scary, intense, and exciting, this fire feels to me also like a sacrament, one the earth has been calling to more and more intently every year.

sacrament – sāk'rə-mənt – noun: 1: A rite believed to be a means of or visible form of grace.

In the quest to re-insert humans into our role here on this piece of land we call Emerald Earth Sanctuary, I toggle between feeling hopeful and having direction to feeling inadequate and useless in the face of the systemic challenges. There is so much we're up against, I think, as I type this on my computer. Even doing this burn required countless hours on the computer, phone calls, planning, permits, and coordination. All things that, essentially, seem to separate me from the actual work of connecting to this land.

At this point in the Great Turning/Great Unraveling/Climate and Social Collapse, I strongly believe we ALL need to claim a place on earth, to commit, and hold tight. A place on earth grounds us, gives a focus and a metric for our work and relations. It offers a clear view of the havoc wrought by human “development” and climate change, as we relate to the same land, year after year. Rachel Carson only recognized the “Silent Spring” because she was intimately familiar with what “spring” was supposed to sound like!

A place on earth also gives us something to love—to truly love, in that way of deep knowing, for all its perceived faults and imperfections. Sometimes it gets hot here. There's too much poison oak. I wish it would rain in the summer. The California Fires scare me. And it's my beautiful home. Loving it make me vulnerable—it is something I could so easily lose, be it to a fire, drought, or even lawsuits or war.

At times it is truly painful to be committed to place. Joanna Macy teaches that the mental states that have been “diagnosed” as clinical, the sadness and confusion we try to hide as we face the multiplicity of global crises, are actually valid responses to the situation we're in. Trauma is not a pathology. To re-inherit



*Morning planning.*



*Teen Garnet holding the line with a sprayer.*



*Sylvan and the drip torch.*



*Garnet after a day of burning.*



*Team teen.*

Photos by Abeja Hummel

our place on the planet involves feeling empathy and compassion with all of life. To love the things, even knowing they will pass. To be part of a larger, living being. We are the part that can feel and think, experience and express, and share those experiences with each other. Joanna's student Lydia Violet said to me, "We've been asked to normalize the desecration of life....The beauty and terror are not meant to be experienced in isolation."

Imagine the incredible pain the original inhabitants of this land have already endured, losing the land WE now love and want to protect. Whether it became a park, industrial agriculture, strip mines, strip malls, or suburban sprawl, they are no longer allowed to live in and derive sustenance from it. Their place in it—their role in life—was taken away.

All people were once indigenous and connected to a place, and we're all suffering from that trauma of being separated. Engaging in positive ways in a place, reconnecting as a participant, heals the trauma and helps us generate the local ecological knowledge that we need. It also brings us in solidarity with native people. TEK (Traditional Ecological Knowledge) and social justice go hand in hand.

"Humility" derives from the Latin *humus*, meaning soil or ground. Humbly, it's time to apprentice ourselves to the earth and the instruction manual carried by the original inhabitants. To stop moving and choose to commit. I support the "Land Back" movement to give the natives back control of the ancestral land to which they are deeply connected and know how to tend. But there aren't enough local Pomo to do the incredible amount of hard labor needed here at this point. We're going to need to take orders and learn fast. We're going to have to humbly "re-indigenize" ourselves to the land we are on.

Here at the burn, it's my turn to "hold the line." I stand, holding my McCloud—a fire tool that is half hoe, half rake—and watch the teen crew bravely forge into the Poison Oak thicket with drip torches. I trust the well-trained adult crew leader, and am proud of the kids as they learn these essential tools of land care. The sad irony is that a bunch of clueless white settlers are here trying to bring fire back to a landscape that is painfully out of balance, because 200 years ago the native people were forbidden to burn or do most of their other land-tending practices. And now, as we discover how much we need TEK, we also find that TEK stuck in time can't respond adequately to a very different world—both ecologically and socially. To Re-indigenize is to truly live in a world view of Place-Based, Ecological Knowing—cultural wisdom that is responsive to current conditions. These teens are already way ahead of where I was at their age, but there is still such a long way to go!

This re-indigenizing is the only dream I hold for myself and our children that actually makes sense given what we know of the coming climate change, peak oil, and systems collapse. Do we have to ignore what is happening in order to hold a hopeful vision? Peak oil, and in many ways peak "everything," will surely bring chaos, but there is a silver lining to the increasingly high

## Notes from a Parched Land

From my September 18 journal:

There were things that held water, in past dry summers, that I did not recognize. I only know now because that water is gone. The crispy, crunchy dryness of the earth is intensified. The air itself hurts my nostrils.

It's hard to look at. Hard to watch this slow-motion natural disaster named "Drought." I turn away, go inside the house, onto the screen. I am not drawn to be with the dying trees, the dust, the crunchy leaves, and the smoke that fill a world which was once my solace.

Staying away, overwhelmed by my helplessness, as when a loved one is too sick for our hearts to bear, but just when she needs us most.

And so in love I step out, to touch and caress, to bear witness, to sing songs, to feel. Our role, as the two-legged ones, is to tend and care for, but also to love and to feel. To listen. Humbly and in reverence, and at times in pain.

I think of the Sahara, which was once lush and green, and the humans who lived there as it gradually transformed to desert. (Through overgrazing?) At what point did they decide to leave? Or become nomadic Taureg or Bedouin, eking out an existence in the sand?

When and how do we decide if we abandon this home—all that we know and love—for someplace with water? Do we expect it to come back, at least occasionally, enough rains to fill our ponds and make our creeks flow again?

And what of the salmon? Is this the end for them? How could we ever mourn enough for the salmon?

Will there be humans, in a few thousand years, to find our homes and farms and to wonder what happened to us, as we now contemplate the Anasazi?

—AH

costs of travel and instability of systems—it will also bring us back to place. Moving somewhere else is no longer going to be an easy choice. The choice we as a species face, as we approach the myriad of looming environmental thresholds, is: do we continue with "business as usual" and just allow the successive waves of chaos to dominate, or do we make a plan and create a resilient local community and culture of place?

David Whyte writes, "Whatever our contribution, the story is much larger and longer than our own, and we are all in the gift of older stories that we are only now joining...and we are only preparing ourselves for an invitation into something much larger."<sup>2</sup> I await that invitation and smile as the laughter of the teens reaches my ears through the roaring wall of fire in front of me. 🍷

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*Judy "Abeja" Hummel (shelher) has been digging her hands into the dirt at Emerald Earth Sanctuary for 15 years, along with her spouse Tom and now-teenage kid Garnet, as well as a rotating band of communarians, goats, chickens, and wildlife. She is a student of Joanna Macy ([www.joannamacy.net](http://www.joannamacy.net)) and a facilitator of The Work That Reconnects ([workthatreconnects.org](http://workthatreconnects.org)).*

1. Joanna Macy, "Collective Self Interest: The Holonic Shift," *World Business Academy Perspectives*, Vol 9 No 1, 1995, Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

2. David Whyte, *Crossing the Unknown Sea*, 2002, Riverhead Books.



# Sense of Place and Land Back in a Transient Culture

By Rachel Freifelder

This is a personal reflection, not a research article. It will primarily ask questions, not answer them. I hope it stimulates thought and that you, dear reader, may arrive at some insight that I may have missed. I further hope that you will be inspired to do more reading on the topics contained here. The links within and at the end of this article may help.

My first thought was to write two separate articles: one on the dilemmas of “sense of place” for intentional communities in the transient culture of the US, and one on Land Back. I quickly realized that I can’t talk about one topic without the other. Or really it is all one topic.

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Our “tenancy” is more like squatting—our “landlords” did not consent to our being here.

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## US residents and place: the current picture

- “An average resident of the US typically moves every five years.” This is the statistic I learned as a child in the 1970s; a quick search yields similar current statements, though I imagine the true average time between moves has become even shorter. One article I read notes that it “does not include moves after less than a year,” meaning that the most frequent moves are not counted in the average.

- Data show that one major reason that US residents relocate is for their job; the author notes that our culture tends to prioritize work over family or place.

- Nomads have always existed, but people in a truly nomadic society tend to be able to carry all of their possessions on their back, their animal, or their wagon. This is not true of the typical US resident.

- In the US, especially the western US, people may claim deep roots in a place by saying, “I’ve been here for 10 years” (in a city) or “my family has been here for three generations” (in a rural area). In other countries, three generations may be considered to be a short time rather than a long one.

- Most US residents are descended from immigrants, and have heritage from multiple places. This has been idealized as the “Great American Melting Pot.” The obvious exceptions to this statement are the indigenous folks from whom this land was violently stolen.

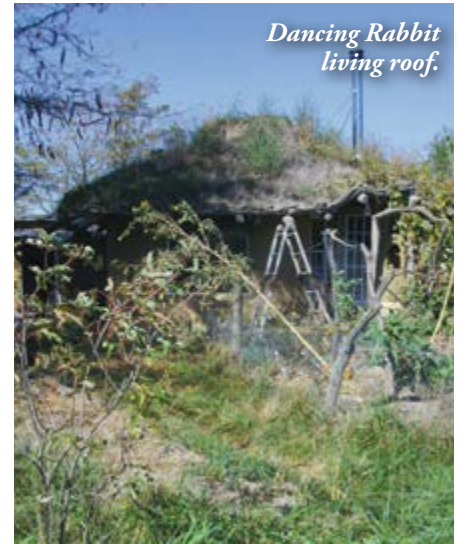
## Intentional communities and place

Communitarians and advocates of sustainable living generally tend to value connection to place. Yet usually the process of founding an intentional community, especially a rural one, involves plans to relocate. It is in fact an implied part of the definition of intentional community; if people simply stay put while being good neighbors and good land stewards, their experience of community is considered to be unintentional. Some community



*Garden beds at Blueberry community.*

Photos by Rachel Freifelder



founders are people who have already moved far from where they were born. Some stay close to home, at least in the metropolitan area or region where they begin. Others move far afield. There may be good reasons for this; the founders don't have enough money to buy land in the area where they live, or other obstacles seem insurmountable.

The rural community of which I was a cofounder in my 20s wanted to create an educational model of ecologically sustainable living. We learned that building codes where we lived (and in many places) would require us to use equipment and materials that conflict with our vision of radical sustainability. Our vision was of a village too large to "fly under the radar." So we moved nearly 2000 miles, to a region with affordable land and no codes, so that we could use home-built composting toilets, build houses of mud and straw, reuse all our greywater in our gardens, and live in very small, densely clustered homes that left most of the land open for farming and reforestation. That community is now 25 years old with over 50 residents, and its educational work has inspired countless people. It may be that had we not relocated, none of this would have happened.

Our group's ability to relocate also stemmed from privilege. We all came from middle-class or wealthier families. We met because of our association with a prestigious private university at which several of us studied.

I left that rural community a year after our location decision and returned to the metropolitan area where we had met. Part of that decision was a belief that I would make more of a difference in that urban setting, working to change things for the better for the millions of people who do not have the privilege of freedom to relocate. Another strong part of the decision was missing the sense of home that I had developed after living there from age 13 to 30. One member of the founding group had lived there his entire life. When we decided to relocate out of state, he left the group rather than leave his home; his sense of place overruled his vision for the new project. Most of the founders were from other regions, and had moved there for college, so moving again was easier for them.

I know of other visionaries who have stayed where they are and put their intention into changing local codes. This takes longer, just as retrofitting an old house takes longer than building a new one. I admire these people greatly.

I now live in an urban community of which I was a cofounder in 2007. It involves people who were already in this city, and houses built before we were born. We fixed up the houses, cleaned up trash, turned lawns into gardens, and built community with our neighbors. Only one of the founders (now gone) and three past residents (also moved on) were born in this region. I invested this effort in a place I intended to live for the rest of my life.

## What is Land Back?

My short answer is: it is the movement to return stolen land to indigenous control. Land acknowledgments (stating whose land this is) are a necessary but not a sufficient

step. There is a wealth of writing already available on this topic; see the end of this article for a few links and search terms.

The majority of US intentional community founders and residents are white, especially in rural sites. And of the minority of communitarians who are people of color, even fewer are Native American.

At the large scale, those of us supporting Land Back can work to support movements for indigenous sovereignty and pressure the colonial government to return US government-held land to indigenous control. For example, the Lakota tribe has been demanding the return of the sacred Black Hills for decades. We can defend the rights of indigenous peoples to control or veto resource extraction on their land. Many communitarians are involved with environmental groups, and we must leverage that activist community to support indigenous sovereignty along with land protection.

But what about the land we live on and/or hold title to? Whether we are urban or rural, a large intentional community or a single household, any non-indigenous resident of this land must ask themselves this question. The larger the land base, the more significant is this question. Understanding that land cannot be "owned" does not relieve us of the responsibility given us by the colonial system of land tenure.

## Real Rent

In Seattle, the Real Rent<sup>1</sup> movement encourages non-indigenous residents to make monthly payments to the Du-





wamish tribe. Some writers call this a voluntary land tax and an article<sup>2</sup> from the Native Governance Center offers guidelines for developing such a program. In your area, the tribe may not have a formal government, or displacement may have divided the tribe between several areas. So part of the decision is: to whom do I pay that rent? In Portland, Oregon, where I live, the appropriate recipient of my rent would be *either* the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde (90 miles south on Siletz land), the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs (70 miles east on Tygh land), or the Chinook Nation, beginning 50 miles to the west and not federally recognized; there is no organized Multnomah/Clackamas/Upper Chinook tribe, as those peoples were displaced to the two reservations named.

Another challenge of this practice is that US cities do not recognize it as an acceptable substitute for paying property taxes to the local government, and most people feel they can't afford to pay double. So the payments to tribes tend to be very small compared to the property tax bill from the city. My property taxes are nearly \$4000 per year, while the amount that I give to indigenous groups is \$50-\$100/month. And because I'm not settled on who I should be paying, I rotate between groups and thus the total amount that any one group receives is even smaller.

Whatever we do, it's important to acknowledge that our "tenancy" is more like squatting—that is, our "landlords"



did not consent to our being here.

A community may decide to give access to the land to which they hold title, either through a formal easement agreement with the tribe or through a policy of welcoming individuals. This is more likely to be meaningful if the land base is larger and also if it contains useful resources such as river frontage, fishing sites, huckleberry patches, etc. It is also more likely to be meaningful if the holders of the land develop a relationship with the tribe. My current community has a commitment of welcome, but it's only come up once on our small urban site. We have an intention to work more at developing a relationship with our local indigenous community, and find ways to be of service.

### Who are your people? Where are you from?

I also cannot discuss this topic without naming my own heritage. Indigenous friends have taught me that the correct way to introduce myself is by naming my ancestors and their origins. Five of my eight great-grandparents were immigrants in the late 1880s. The four who created my father arrived at Ellis Island on boats from Eastern Europe, and spoke Yiddish. They were peasants who came to escape religious and ethnic persecution. They did not have the flexibility of privilege nor did they want to leave their farms and villages; they were running for their lives. The journey was hard, dangerous, and scary. They faced further persecution in their new home. It may not have occurred to them that their ability to escape genocide in Europe by coming to the US was a direct result of the genocide of the peoples who have always lived on and stewarded the land to which they came.

The four that created my mother came from luckier circumstances. My great-grandmother Dorothea Te Strake came from the Netherlands, her family seeking refuge from rural poverty. The other three were born on this land mass, into the bourgeoisie of ranchers and merchants, descended from settlers and colonists who hold clear accountability for the genocide of indigenous peoples and may have actually participated in it.

My father was born in the Jewish ghetto of west Philadelphia, on Lenape land, my mother in Racine, Wisconsin, on Potawatomi land. They met on the land of the Ohlone people, now called Berkeley, California.

### “Go back to where you came from!”

Ironically, these words are often spoken by settlers of European descent to indigenous people migrating in search of economic survival.

Should white folks “go back to Europe”? Some radical settler-descendants believe we should. For most the response is, back to where? I was not born in Europe, nor were my parents. My ancestry is from six countries in Europe, none of which are likely to welcome me as a citizen. Three of those countries would be completely unfamiliar; I’ve never been there and don’t speak the local languages. As a Jew I could immigrate to Israel, where the colonial government is oppressing the indigenous Palestinians; this doesn’t seem ethically preferable to staying on Turtle Island.

I was born on Massasoit and Wampanoag land, to which my parents immigrated from the land of the Ohlone people. My mother had at least one ancestor who lived in Wampanoag territory in 1640. I’m not aware of having any Massasoit or Wampanoag ancestry, though statistically it’s possible, i.e. some forefather may have raped an indigenous woman. Does that give me more right to live in Massachusetts than Oregon?

Fortunately, leaders like Winona LaDuke (Anishinaabe) emphasize that they’re not asking for individual settler-descendants to leave the places where we live. Whew! What a relief for us illegal immigrants. Nick Tilsen (Oglala Lakota Nation) of NDN collective says “Everyone is welcome...[in this] movement to build collective liberation.”<sup>3</sup>

What if settlers and refugees truly honored the sovereignty of the original peoples of this land, rather than of the conquering power? What if we imagine the land had it never been stolen? I dream of my refugee great-grandparents arriving in 1888 at the shores of Manahatta<sup>4</sup>, where Lenape-speaking immigration officials would have directed them and other cold, hungry Latvian and Estonian refugees to a camp where they were offered garden plots and materials to build simple shelters. They would have learned to speak Lenape and other languages of the region, rather than English. Perhaps the indigenous women would have offered classes for my great-grandmothers to learn to tend and cook the local crops.

### Necessary but not sufficient

Some efforts that I make in service to Land Back:

- Participate in and support BIPoC-led demonstrations for justice, including Land Back, Black Lives Matter, and rights of recent immigrants of color.
- Listen to indigenous people who I want to “help” before taking any action. In particular, I’ve reached out to staff at





*Dancing Rabbit strawbale house.*



an indigenous-led organization in my area for feedback on my community's land relationships. A community outreach coordinator who serves on that organization's Land Equity Team has agreed to meet with members of my intentional community. We will pay that person for their time.

- Volunteer at Native American Youth and Family Center<sup>5</sup>.
- Give money and leverage my privilege to raise money for indigenous-led groups working for Land Back and cultural survival.
- Give other materials if specifically requested—plant medicines, garden materials, water.
- Think of the money I give as “rent,” i.e. an obligation, rather than as a donation. (Even as I revised this article, I found the word “donate” and corrected it. Old habits die hard!)

• Commit to welcoming any person indigenous to this land who wants access to the land to which I hold title. At the moment this is a 9000 s.f. city lot. I live in community but am sole title holder to the house I live in and the lot it sits on, so I have the agency to make this commitment of welcome. So far my roommates have aligned with this commitment. I have a further commitment that if I move to a rural site, I will use as much agency as the site allows me to give this access. This means that if I join a preexisting rural intentional community, I will work to develop a relationship with the indigenous people on whose land the community sits, and encourage the community to formally give access to that people. This is completely theoretical until such time as I know where that is.

This last commitment raises more discussion. My ideal is to give access to members of the tribe for harvesting first foods, education, ritual, or other uses of the land which benefit all. A neighbor who is of the local tribe once stopped by spontaneously, and expressed interest in using our small area of native food and medicine plants for youth education. We were excited and encouraged him to come back any time he likes, but he hasn't, and none of us got his phone number. We hope an opportunity like this will arise again, and that we will do better at relationship-building.

Meanwhile, there are indigenous people living unhoused, all over this city. Some of those people may engage in problematic behaviors, undoubtedly related to the immediate trauma of homelessness and the historical trauma of violent land theft. What if one of those folks came here asking to live here? Philosophically I would like to say yes. Are my roommates and I prepared to welcome a person into our home who may have behaviors that are harmful both to themselves and to us? So far no such person

has approached us. We have welcomed a few people on a temporary basis who were living outdoors. None of them were indigenous. It was challenging for us, and we gave each person a clear end date.

A few groups I have volunteered with and/or given to:

- Native American Youth and Family Center: [nayapdx.org](http://nayapdx.org)
- White Earth Land Recovery Project: [www.welrp.org](http://www.welrp.org)
- Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs: [warmsprings-nsn.gov](http://warmsprings-nsn.gov)
- Idle No More (Indigenous revolution): [idlenomore.ca](http://idlenomore.ca)
- Canoe Journey: [chinooknation.org/canoe-journey](http://chinooknation.org/canoe-journey)
- NODAPL: [action.lakotalaw.org/nodapl](http://action.lakotalaw.org/nodapl)
- Stop Line 3: [www.stopleveline3.org](http://www.stopleveline3.org)
- Black Mesa Indigenous Support: [unsettlingamerica.wordpress.com/solidarity-projects/black-mesa-indigenous-support](http://unsettlingamerica.wordpress.com/solidarity-projects/black-mesa-indigenous-support)
- Unist'ot'en Camp: [unistoten.camp/about/wetsuweten-people](http://unistoten.camp/about/wetsuweten-people)

## Transplanting

Back to the personal sense of place: when I invested in the place where I now live, I literally put down roots. I've planted 13 trees, and hope at least the five native forest trees will outlive me. I have neighbor relationships that go back 15 years, and I believe this community will continue with or without me. I thought I would live here until I die. A few years ago I began to struggle with the challenges of living in a city: toxic noise, urban heat islands created by vast expanses of masonry. So I'm considering moving again and have started looking into rural intentional communities that I might want to join. This raises an abundance of dilemmas, of course.

Fifteen years ago I planted blueberries, also non-indigenous. Some of them are still here. Some are thriving and some are clearly in places that do not serve their needs. I've made the difficult decision to move these established but struggling plants in hope that in the long run they will do better in their new homes. So far I have moved two. They had deep, thick roots, which I cut to move them. Seeing those roots made me wonder if moving them was really a good choice. I know they will take extra care to re-establish,

but I'm hoping it will be less than the work to keep them half-alive in their former spots. Now that I've moved those two, I've decided that two others I had planned to move will get to stay put. I'll try to improve other aspects of their living conditions without moving them.

As I write and revise this, the city to which I transplanted myself in 2005 is reeling from horrific violence. The racial justice community of which I consider myself a part is grieving the loss of a 60-year-old traffic safety volunteer who was murdered at a Black Lives Matter march; four other volunteers were critically wounded by the same crazed gunman and several more barely escaped. Tragedy like this brings a community together and scares people away, yes both. For me, it moves me to turn toward my city and my activist community.

### Do you need to move?

Only you can answer this question. We community founders are visionaries, and we imagine that if no one else has created what we want to create, that it is our job to create it. Consider: can I create my vision in the region where I am? What would it take? What is missing? If I can't create it here, does the project I envision already exist somewhere else? If so, can I put my effort into that project, rather than starting new? Or can I use that existing model to create what I want, right here where I am? If we still think we need to relocate, is there a place that we already have a connection to?

### Final thoughts

I've wondered how to end this article. It is a snapshot of a process of learning and reflection that I imagine will be lifelong. Every sentence I've written could lead to a long paragraph, or a whole article.

A summary of my life as relates to this topic: I live and was born on stolen land. I was born in a place to which I am not indigenous, and I no longer live in that place. My indigenous roots are in a desert diaspora thousands of years ago, and in a collection of islands in the north Atlantic. I was raised with a belief that you will "go where the jobs are" and as a young adult moved repeatedly for a job or a project. The rural intentional com-

munity I was party to founding chose the "best place for the project" with a commitment to put down roots, and I believe it has done so. I value roots and admire deeply rooted beings.

I would like to believe that my roots are anchored to the center of the earth rather than to one spot. 🌱

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*Rachel Freifelder was a founder of Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage ([www.dancingrabbit.org](http://www.dancingrabbit.org)) and now lives at Blueberry ([www.ic.org/directory/blueberry](http://www.ic.org/directory/blueberry)), an urban community on the unceded lands of the Multnomah, Chinook, Kalapuya, and many other peoples, commonly known as Portland, Oregon. She is aware of the many opportunities for error in discussing indigenous sovereignty struggles, and invites feedback.*

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1. [www.realrentduwamish.org](http://www.realrentduwamish.org)
2. [nativegov.org/news/voluntary-land-taxes](http://nativegov.org/news/voluntary-land-taxes)
3. [globalsolidaritylocalaction.sites.haverford.edu/what-does-land-restitution-mean](http://globalsolidaritylocalaction.sites.haverford.edu/what-does-land-restitution-mean)
4. [welikia.org/explore/mannahatta-map](http://welikia.org/explore/mannahatta-map)
5. [nayapdx.org](http://nayapdx.org)

### Other Resources

Links:

- [resourcegeneration.org/land-reparations-indigenous-solidarity-action-guide](http://resourcegeneration.org/land-reparations-indigenous-solidarity-action-guide)
- [americanart.si.edu/artwork/whos-illegal-alien-pilgrim-115575](http://americanart.si.edu/artwork/whos-illegal-alien-pilgrim-115575)
- [www.protectthackerpass.org](http://www.protectthackerpass.org)
- [native-land.ca](http://native-land.ca)

Search terms for further research:

- Land Back
- land equity
- real rent
- NDN Collective
- Honor the Earth
- back to whose land?





# Community Building in Paradise

*By Graham Ellis*



Hawaii—sandy beaches, surfing, palm trees, tropical fruits, fiery volcanoes, and hula dancing—a playground for the rich and famous. These typical tourist perceptions made it easy to attract members when I founded Bellyacres ecovillage in 1987. Life on the world's remotest archipelago appears to be a tranquil paradise but I discovered, like all locations, Hawaii has its challenges especially when developing an intentional sustainable community.

Hawaii Island is a unique kind of paradise. With waterfalls, cliffs, white, black, and green sand beaches, ranch lands, tropical rainforests, snow-capped mountains, and its sheer size—it's a gem. It has a population of only 200,000 people but is larger than Jamaica where three million live in close proximity. The Big Island is rural, very rural.

When I gathered a group of troubadour globetrotting jugglers to collectively steward a piece of this paradise we chose the district of Puna because its wildness and freedoms suited our bohemian lifestyles. I'd already established a network of friends among the local back-to-the-land hippie homesteaders, land was really cheap and, as self-proclaimed anarchists, my partners and I anticipated minimal government oversight of our communal experiment. We had idealistic dreams of eking out a Swiss Family Robinson type of existence in our new jungle

home living close to the land, simply and sustainably.

We paid only \$55,000 for over 10 acres and set up a land trust to secure the property for future generations. After bulldozing roads and clearings for orchards and house sites we had very little capital left to install infrastructure, build homes, and plant trees. The blessing was that we were forced to learn low-overhead sustainable practices. Our response, based upon our chosen place, led us to become pioneers in utilising solar energy, collecting rainwater, developing sewage and other civilised systems. We were mostly all city people but thrived totally off grid and it felt good to be experimenting with ways to live more harmoniously with the earth.

Because of our climate, after a period using tents and tarps, we invested in yurts and later built structures that included recycled or repurposed materials incorporating lumber harvested from our forest home. Our neighbours shared their agricultural knowledge which helped us plant a diversity of delicious fruit trees including avocado, mango, coconuts, papayas, and bananas. We experienced the primal satisfaction that comes from constructing your own home and the pride from eating food harvested directly from your land and, as our awareness of global warming grew, from living virtually free of any carbon footprint.

We organised annual vaudeville festivals for 20 years which enabled us to connect with our Big Island neighbours in a fun way. As

a group of performers we were well known and had a wide network of friends. Our itinerant ecovillage members, international guests, and hundreds of work-exchange interns all had great experiences visiting the island. They swam in turquoise water with spinning dolphins, basked in thermally heated warm ponds, hiked to the edge of the world's most active volcano, and shared our Robinson Crusoe lifestyle. In those early days we were full of enthusiasm, energy, and idealism and blissfully lived the dream, but changes were looming on the horizon.

I highly recommend that anyone choosing a place to start an intentional community seriously study what it might look like in 10, 20, and even 30 years into the future. Some changes are predictable but many were not obvious to us especially the impacts of global warming. Over three decades our location has transformed in unimaginable ways that have severely affected our lives. Like the frog in the slow-boiling pot I maintained my optimism, grew my resilience, and adapted to many changes, while not noticing their full effects on me, my family, and my community. One day the bubble burst.

Bellyacres is located adjacent to Seaview Estates subdivision and when we began there were only 10 houses built on the neighbouring 933 lots. As construction slowly increased, our ecovillage was appreciated and supported by the vast majority of residents and our community grew. By the year 2000, after electricity was controversially installed on the subdivision and the access road was improved, there was a huge rise in the numbers of mainlanders moving in. By 2017 there were over 300 homes on lots only one-fifth of an acre. This dramatic change in demographics caused tremendous friction between the different socioeconomic groups and build-out has created serious problems. The more traditional rural homesteading lifestyle which Bellyacres modelled—with large extended families, chickens, dogs, and often unpermitted structures—clashed with the values of newcomers wanting privacy, rising land values, and mainland standards of service. The police, social services, and county planning and building departments increasingly found themselves in the middle of cultural and economic conflicts that were hard to resolve amicably.

Living in a forested area was one of five criteria our group chose when selecting our property but it came with unexpected troubles. We chose to preserve as many of these majestic native and invasive trees as possible but then learned that they provided the perfect

habitat for a host of insects and other creepy-crawlies. Moans and groans were commonly heard about the abundance of irritating mosquitoes, ants, coquis, and spiders. However, there are also cockroaches, blister beetles, termites, centipedes, and irritating pooping geckos in addition to the tenacious rats, and slugs...and the list goes on. The canopy of our jungle trees also created a canopy for the year-round growth of weeds and vines that constantly need to be cut back. It's really hard work in the heat and was fine when we were young and energetic but has become a problem with our aging membership. A new threat to ecological balance came to Puna just 10 years ago; it's called Rapid 'Ohi'a Death, and kills trees from saplings to 200-year-old monsters in weeks. It now affects at least 85,000 acres on the Big Island, with no known solution. As they die Bellyacres has sadly been forced to cut down dozens of these heritage native trees in the last decade.

Before joining our ecovillage most of our members were unaware that tropical living necessitates accommodating extreme natural events. We can suffer droughts for months and then have tropical storms that ravage the islands, dumping huge amounts of rain inflicting severe flooding and wind damage. Lightning strikes are common and have hit Bellyacres and surrounding areas many times, blowing out expensive solar inverters, phones, modems, appliances, and even batteries. Our original uninsulated power lines had direct hits a few times and, on one occasion, two residents were blown off their feet by the shock of a lightning bolt and one remained frighteningly deaf for six hours.

When we chose our location most Puna residents held the belief that the district was immune from hurricanes. That myth was shattered in 2014 when 26 homes were destroyed; roads were blocked for days; 22,000 trees were blown down; and power and telephone services were cut off for thousands of residents for up to three weeks. Now, with global climate change as an accepted reality and with record numbers of hurricanes approaching the islands each year from the east, residents are fully aware that their first potential landfall is Puna...and they are rightfully scared.

In 1987 living downslope and near to the active fault line of Kilauea Volcano was exciting. We hiked to the crater, watched eruptions, played with lava flows, bathed in thermally heated pools, and even enjoyed subterranean steam vents. Within just a few years the lava totally destroyed Kalapana, a small Hawaiian fishing village five miles away, and our perspective changed. We



Photos courtesy of Graham Ellis



then had some years of relative quiet but in 2014 flows threatened to destroy Pahoā, our nearest town, and caused lots of concern. The Hawaii military reserve troops were called in to provide security and manage roadblocks. The recent 2018 flows were much worse, the most devastating in 200 years, and covered over 750 homes in subdivisions just 10 miles away. For the second time in four years Puna was designated a natural disaster area.

Whole families have been permanently separated and isolated from their community, and our healthy functioning social network has been shattered, leaving Puna in a state of emotional pain and grief. Residents know that sooner or later another disaster will occur but as with hurricanes we can only hope that it happens away from our neighbourhood.

Like the lava activity, many of the features that originally attracted us to Puna and provided us with a quality life have shifted over the years. In the early '80s the area was a haven for hippies, surfers, and homesteaders with a free-wheelin' easy-going lifestyle. Residents lived in whatever structures they chose, grew marijuana, and experimented with sustainable living. It was peaceful and mellow. Then *Time* magazine published an article describing it as the "Marijuana Capital of the USA." The Drug Enforcement Agency decided to make a federal example of this lawless behavior and set

up an office in Pahoā and began eradication operations. Post offices and airports had routine inspections of packages and baggage—marijuana arrests skyrocketed, while land and vehicles were confiscated. In one year over 1.8 million plants were eradicated.

Several of our original neighbours were imprisoned or relocated to the US west coast. The sound of low-flying helicopters became a weekly occurrence. They landed on our local roads and parks regularly to unload their illicit cargo and, on one occasion, landed right in the middle of Bellyacres. We lived in a war zone!

Marijuana prices rose from \$100 to \$300 per ounce and, within a few years, Puna had the worst meth crisis in the nation. The bustling businesses previously fueled by marijuana money started closing down and the sidewalks became occupied by casualties of the crystal methamphetamine epidemic. With "ice" came crime, including violent offenses, which was a new experience for our peaceful rural town. Social services were overwhelmed with broken families, abandoned children, and abused wives.

The new wave of violence reached almost everyone. In 2013 my wife looked out the kitchen window of our house into our fruit orchard and exclaimed, "Oh my god! There's swat police with guns walking down the driveway!" Apparently, a known methamphetamine addict with an arrest warrant and a gun had been chased and





crashed his stolen car into our Bellyacres rear entrance. They failed to catch their prey that day and we spent a restless night wondering where he might be lurking. With so many jungle hiding places and several empty buildings, he could have easily remained concealed inside our ecovillage.

Fortunately these incidents all pass by, the sun returns, surfs up, and exotic fruits continue to fall but one adversary that never seems to go away is the County Planning Department. They historically have had Directors and Planners who gave virtually no importance to the development of sustainable community on either a macro or micro scale. Their remit and culture has always been to promote the growth of capitalist commercialism. For three decades, along with other concerned residents, I assisted in the creation and updating of our district Puna Community Development Plan only to witness it being ignored or belittled by consecutive government administrations.

As the activities of our ecovillage increased to support our neighbourhood, hosting a farmers' market, a public charter school, performances, arts programs, and community meetings, we attracted some complainers. At that point we had to deal with the rules and regulations imposed by a Planning Department that wasn't interested in understanding or encouraging community development. Consequently, we've had to scale back our service activities and focus on conforming our unpermitted eclectic structures to building code standards which has irked me considerably.

Connection with the host culture and honouring their traditions is important to me. History shows that before western contact the Hawaiians were 100 percent self-sustainable with a greater population than exists today and we have lots to learn from them. I befriended several of the local Keli'ihō'omalū family (Ohana) and they've since shared their wisdom on community, location-appropriate food production, and cultural traditions. The family Patriarch, Uncle Robert, taught classes about the overthrow of the Hawaiian Queen in 1893 and the subsequent occupation of the islands by the US. The family are part of a populist sovereignty movement that is slowly growing as more Hawaiians and residents learn that under international law the Kingdom of Hawaii still exists.

My wife and I joined this host culture organisation and later became Hawaii citizens. Meanwhile other members of Bellyacres had a range of opinions and views on the subject. In 2010 when ordered by the Hawaii County administration to comply with their codes I personally wanted to refuse on the grounds that under international laws of occupation they do not have jurisdiction. About a third of

our group supported this action but we never were able to reach consensus. Under the status quo our ecovillage accepted the rule of the County of Hawaii and has consequently suffered the consequences.

Not only a place but also people change over the years. Traveling to Hawaii from far-away permanent homes (Hawaii is 2,400 miles from the West Coast, 5,000 miles from the East Coast, and 10,000 miles from Europe) has become a major issue for many of my ecovillage partners and they are spending much less time on the land. Even before Covid and carbon footprint concerns, travel had become difficult for members who had families, jobs, and a mortgage elsewhere. Their visits have decreased significantly in numbers and duration as they have integrated into other urban, less sustainable communities. From a peak of nearly 40 residents our ecovillage now has only a dozen.

Life is still good at Bellyacres, the climate is mostly perfect, food grows year-round, and there is a lively diverse neighbourhood with an abundance of skills in sustainable living. Puna people have demonstrated repeatedly they are strong and resilient and in times of trouble can be the very best of neighbors. But, just like any paradise location, there's a dark side and sometimes a high price is paid for the benefits of a low-cost and more sustainable lifestyle.

Despite all these changes and challenges living in community in Puna on Hawaii Island, after five years of reflection living in the UK, I still believe that it is one of the best places on the planet to be located during the upcoming climate change crisis—especially with the support of a thriving ecovillage community. 🌿

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*Graham Ellis cofounded a workers collective in Victoria, Canada and a community development project in St. Lucia, West Indies before moving to Hawaii. In 1987 he founded the Bellyacres ecovillage on a 10 acre jungle lot with a vision to experiment with sustainable community living practices. In 2010 he became the founding president of the Hawaii Sustainable Community Alliance after Bellyacres was issued a cease and desist order. He spent the next four years promoting County and State legislation to legalize sustainable living in Hawaii. In 2017 Graham was deported back to the UK, where he now lives with his wife and family seeking a return to the values and joys of sustainable communal living.*

*This article is an extract from Graham's book about his three decades living in a sustainable community experiment in Puna, Hawaii. It's called Juggling Fire in the Jungle and an ebook version can be purchased from the bookstore at [ic.org](http://ic.org)*



# Back to the Land in Maniac Valley

By Simon Fairlie

*The following is an adapted excerpt from Chapter Six of Simon Fairlie's new book Going to Seed: A Counterculture Memoir (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2022) and is reprinted with permission from the publisher. Here, we join the UK-based author in the early 1970s...*

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If anyone as stupid as myself is ever tempted to employ the roofing technique we used, my advice is don't.

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The quest for an alternative society, pursued to its logical conclusion, requires land. It is the most basic of the means of production, which Karl Marx had advised the working class to reclaim. That was one reason why, after the eviction of the Butt Road squats, I and others started talking about getting hold of some. There was also a less ideological desire to find somewhere to live and work with a degree of independence and security. Lewis Mumford, in *Technics and Civilization* (1934), has a passage explaining what motivated some of the emigrants to the US over the course of the last few centuries:

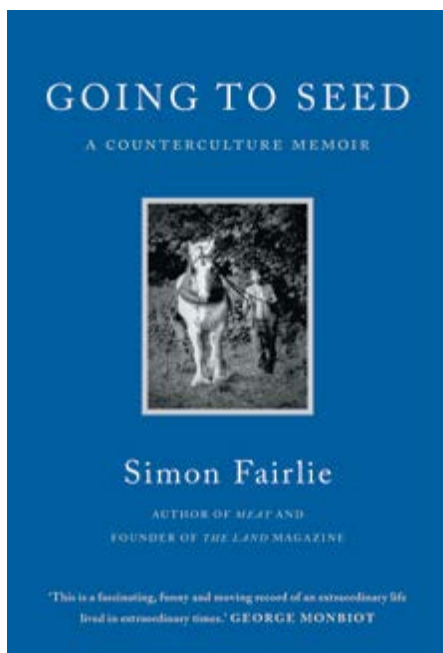
*The desire to be free from social compulsion, the desire for economic security, the desire to return to nature...provided both the excuse and the motive power for escaping from the new mechanical civilization that was closing in upon the Western World. To shoot, to trap, to chop trees, to hold a plough, to prospect, to face a seam—all these primitive occupations out of which technics had originally sprung, all these occupations that had been closed and stabilized by the very advances of technics, were now open to the pioneer: he might be hunter, fisher, woodman, and farmer by turn, and by engaging in these occupations people could restore their plain animal vigor as men and women, temporarily freed from the duties of a more orderly and servile existence.*

There was something of this pioneering spirit in our search for land, and I had my share of animal vigour. The question was where to find land. I and my two mates from the purple potato farm, Leon and Greg, set off to look for it up north in the bread van, in the hope that land with derelict buildings on it might be a bit more available. We didn't find anything promising. Instead we gained a fuller understanding of the nature of English landownership when we drove through moorland near Barnard Castle and every farmhouse for miles and miles was painted in the same livery, denoting ownership by his Lordship. We went to Nelson, at the very edge of the Greater Manchester conurbation, where houses were regularly advertised in *Exchange and Mart* for a mere £200. This frontier between town and country, where rows of back-to-back terraced houses faced off a bleak treeless hillside, looked too grimly structured to be comfortable, though some hippies did make it their home in years to come.

Later in the summer, I received an international phone call from the South of France. It was Leon. "Come down," he said. "There's land for sale here cheap. I've just bought a hectare with a barn for £350." I took a week off work, put most of my money into traveller's cheques, and hitched down to a village called Arboras, not far from Montpellier, where I met up with Leon on his newly acquired patch of reverted wilderness. I forget how we coordinated such encounters in the days before mobile phones and emails, but it wasn't a problem.

Leon was a portly German who worked as a milkman in Colchester, had artistic pretensions and an eye for a deal, legal or otherwise. His land turned out to be a hectare of *garrigue*—prickly, calcareous scrubland capable of keeping a goat alive for about half a year—with no water, but a sizable stone *bergerie* (sheep shed), roofless but sound, and good for repair. It wasn't brilliant, but for £350 (about £4,300 in today's money) you couldn't complain.

The next day we went to the local town, Clermont-l'Hérault, and checked in at its only



estate agent. “Do you have any small parcels of agricultural land for sale, preferably with a ruin?” They did. It was 1.4 hectares, also in Arboras, on the banks of a river called the Lagamas. It had two ruined watermills on it, one dating back to the 13th century. It was a little over £600, one-third the price of a Hewlett Packard desktop calculator.

There were indeed two ruined mills. The plot was covered in scrubby bushes—broom, juniper, gorse, and redoul (*Coriaria myrtifolia*)—but it included half an acre of flat arable land. There was a deep canyon with a 10-foot waterfall in the river traversed by a perilous stone arch bridge some 25 feet above. We later found out it was called the Pont du Crime because years before a woman had thrown her baby off it. We went back to the estate agents. “I’ll buy it,” I said. I cashed the traveller’s cheques and put down a deposit. That was my future sealed for the next 10 years.

Back in Colchester, four of us agreed to club together to buy the land: Carol, myself, Baz, and Jane. The land cost us £150 each, six weeks’ wages on the dust-carts where Baz and I both worked. We resolved to save up some cash, buy tools and provisions, and move down there the following spring.

Meanwhile something else momentous was happening. Carol was pregnant. It was our choice to have a child; but in fact, I was much too young (or immature) to be a father, too young even to realise I was too young. In hindsight, one might regret fathering a child too young, and any problems that may have caused. But of course I don’t regret it, because if I hadn’t done it, our daughter Jade wouldn’t exist.

Jade was born in early December 1973. It was a home delivery, unusual in those days and the first that the young midwife had ever done. She was visibly nervous, but all went well, and I was relieved to see that (unlike some) Jade really was a beautiful baby. Her arrival coincided with the appearance in the sky of Comet Kohoutek, which returns only once every 75,000 or so years, and was predicted by the Children of God cult to unleash a doomsday event. Since doomsday never happened, Carol and I fancied that instead it must have been heralding the arrival of our daughter.

It never occurred to me that starting a family and establishing a community on a



Photos by Chris Roth

plot of abandoned land in a foreign country, with little in the way of practical skills or money, might be a trifle over-ambitious. Just before Easter 1974, Jane, Baz, and I set off for Arboras in a Ford Trader three-tonne van loaded to the brim with kit, leaving Carol and Jade behind to come later. We had two large army bell tents, mattresses, tarpaulins, hand tools of every description, rope, cooking equipment, a couple of the same stainless steel cauldrons we had used at Pilton, a pump, nickel cadmium batteries, a 12 to 240 volt inverter that was basically a dynamo, Tilley lamps, seeds, sacks of lentils and rice, Marmite and Mars bars.

### Settling

Except for the birth of a baby, there are few things more exciting than moving onto a new plot of land, and it doesn’t happen often in life. We cleared away some of the bushes, erected the army tents, named the land Le Moulin, and surveyed the scene. The river Lagamas was no more than a stream but we had been assured it never ran dry, and the existence of the mills seemed to prove the point. It sprang from the escarpment to the north towering some 500 metres above us that marked the edge of the Massif Central, and gouged a ravine down a narrow valley some five kilometres long. The valley was carpeted from one end to the other in trees, mostly holm oak, and not much else. But if you walked upstream through the woods there were some deserted stone huts and numerous flat terraces defined by dry stone walls, crumbling under the assault of the oak roots. This was a fertile, but largely abandoned valley, in contrast to the next one along the escarpment that had no terraces, few trees, and a river bed of parched dry rock that became a torrent when it rained.

Our mills were near the mouth of the valley as it opened out into the great plain of the Languedoc, which was a sea of vineyards. Overlooking this vista, perched on a ridge that separated the Lagamas valley from its rocky neighbour, was the village of Arboras. It consisted of a single street of about 25 houses, a small church, a chateau, a *mairie*—a communal bread oven that no one used any longer—and a bus stop. The voting population was 54 but some didn’t live there permanently. Of those who did, virtually all were *vignerons* (wine growers), about 10 families in all. The exception was the owner of the chateau, a Scotsman, who had bought it for a song in the 1960s, from its occupants who were the poorest farming family in the village.

At 23 years of age, with a head full of dotty ideas, little experience of building or agricultural work, and no money, I was pathetically ill-equipped to undertake the establishment of a smallholding. The days I spent trying to erect secondhand stock fencing along a precipitous hillside that was little more than solid rock in a doomed attempt to keep goats in





doesn't bear thinking about, nor does the time we spent double digging heavy clay soil to produce onions the size of strawberries and cabbages the size of onions.

Carol came down with Jade, now six months old, in the summer so I was keen to provide something in the way of shelter and comfort that was superior to the army tents. We decided to sling a roof across the triangular gap between the remaining walls of the second reservoir, which was otherwise beyond repair. We had no money to buy sawn timber so we cobbled together a framework with whatever roundwood I could find, and for the roofing material opted to use a technique I'd found in an alternative building book called *The Owner-Built Home*, which involved rubbing cement mortar into hessian sacks. If anyone as stupid as myself is ever tempted to employ this technique, my advice is don't. There is (predictably) no way that these slabs are ever going to be waterproof, and the impregnated sacks rot over time. But to make matters worse I had underestimated the weight of the mortar, so the whole roof sagged, creating a puddle that instead of shedding water, collected it. No amount of tar and felt was ever going to seal this upside down umbrella. It was a glaring testament to my incompetence.

This did not help endear Carol, Baz and Jane to the place, but it did not put me off. "If a fool would persist in his folly he would become wise," was my reasoning. Meanwhile a couple of Germans, Pius and Maria, bought another hectare of land just upstream from our land. Over the summer various freaks from Britain and Germany rocked up and pitched their tents and by the second summer the valley was peopled with young hippies drinking cheap wine, smoking grass (that we had managed to grow successfully) and bathing naked in the hot sun and the cool clear river.

The reaction of the local villagers to this invasion was remarkably sanguine, particularly compared to the mean-spirited reaction that settlers on land in Britain so often receive from well-heeled members of the rural community. Perhaps it was partly because that area of France was already accustomed to immigrants; they had received a large quota of Spanish communists and anarchists at the end of the civil war. At first, when they didn't know what to make of us, the villagers called us *les gitanes* (the gypsies), but there was no evidence of any hostility. Once they had established that we could work hard, didn't steal, and weren't turning their daughters onto drugs, relations between us and the village were on first name terms.

It also helped that we fulfilled an economic need. Over previous decades, villages such as Arboras had become progressively depopulated. Many poor peasants, like the previous occupants of the Chateau, sold what lands they had and migrated to cities such as Montpellier to take up more lucrative jobs. About half the houses in the village were empty. Deep in the first winter, when only Carol, Jade, and myself were living there, the secretary of the mayor of Arboras turned up to interview us. He was completing a census return and wanted to know how many of us were living on site. When we told him that there were just two of us and the baby, he said, "But surely there are more of you than that? What about Monsieur Barry and his wife? In the summer there were at least 10 of you, n'est-ce pas?" He eventually confided that the village population needed to surpass a certain thresh-

old to qualify for additional funding, and so we agreed that yes, there probably were at least six people living here.

Elaine Morgan, in her magnificent 1976 book *Falling Apart*, observed a similar entente between hippies and locals in rural Wales:

*When they arrive and settle in or near a small village they are often initially unwelcome because of beads and beards and cannabis and carryings-on. But if they stay, and the strangeness wears off, the village benefits. They don't come like second home buyers with a wallet full of cash to push up house prices, they move into places that were empty or falling down, and stave off the decline. The bus service has a few more regular customers. The local school gets an influx of five or six toddlers. The farmer for the first time in years has a reserve of unskilled labour. Oftener than not, the buzz of outrage that greeted their arrival diminishes and becomes perfunctory. The economic effect of these communes over a rural area is like sowing clumps of marram grass on a sand dune—they look sparse, but they serve to halt the erosion.*

And yes, the local vigneron needed our labour. In the depressed economic climate after the oil crisis of 1973, urban jobs were harder to find and the younger generation became more inclined to look to the land for their future. There was much talk of *la sauvegarde de la patrimoine*, "safeguarding our heritage," and of reviving and improving local wine production. However there was a shortage of agricultural labourers and the Spanish grape-pickers were not arriving for the harvest in the numbers they had done in years gone by. In the September of our first year several of us were working on the *vendange*. By the second year, with the influx of visitors from Britain and Germany, we were supplying harvesting teams to half of the vigneron in the village. Meanwhile, our place was looking more and more like a fully fledged hippy commune, referred to by some as Maniac Valley.

## Self-Sufficiency

Once our first substantial building project, our communal roundhouse, was finished, other dwellings started springing up. Martin and Brele put a roof on the top mill, Dick built himself a wooden cabin, and I built a lean-to against a stone wall with a

tilled roof that was a considerable improvement on my first attempt. A range of similar structures was sprouting on the German side. At one point Lucien, in a new capacity as *mayor*, got in a minor panic about planning permission, but he soon managed to iron things out. He obtained a residency permit for me on the bogus grounds that I was an “*exploitant agricole*,” i.e. a farmer, and then managed to wangle planning consent for four residential structures.

We still strove to produce a measure of food from our three acres, though not very successfully. We kept goats, though the amount of work involved in fencing, walking, or tethering them was disproportionate to the return in milk. I soon abandoned vegetarianism when it became plain that keeping billy goat kids was impossible, and killing them without eating them was ridiculous. Our chickens laid eggs in the undergrowth, which we would only discover when they exploded in hot weather. Our ducks got taken by the fox within a week, one every night. We bought a young sow only to find, when we got it home, that male pigs have teats as well. Our garden flourished when we planted tomatoes or courgettes, but vegetables of a northerly disposition would never get to be more than stunted parodies of the picture on the seed packet.

Had Stewart Brand come to Arboras in about 1980 he would probably have seen it as vindication of a diatribe he’d written seven years after publishing the first edition of *The Whole Earth Catalog*. “Self-sufficiency,” he wrote in 1975 in his magazine *Co-Evolution Quarterly*:

*is an idea which has done more harm than good. On close conceptual examination it is flawed at the root. More importantly, it works badly in practice. Anyone who has actually tried to live in total self-sufficiency—there must be now several thousands in the recent wave that we (culpa!) helped inspire—knows the mind-numbing labor and loneliness and frustration and real marginless hazard that goes with the attempt. It is a kind of hysteria.*

There were plenty who agreed with Brand at the time, and his comments are largely accurate about “total self-sufficiency,” but that is the straw man in the argument. Few people strive for anything beyond a measure of self-sufficiency, and we

definitely didn’t. It is also a common mistake to view self-sufficiency in terms only of the provision of nourishment, which, although of prime importance, comprises only 10 percent or so of the modern household’s budget.

At Maniac Valley we only produced a fraction of what we ate, and we weren’t manufacturing our own shoes. But we did supply our own water, our heating and cooking fuel, our accommodation, our laundry, our sewage and waste disposal, our swimming pool, and our dope; and though we didn’t own vineyards, our labours on our neighbours’ produced considerably more wine than the quantity we drank, which represented at least 30 percent of our entire calorific intake.

More to the point these days than self-sufficiency is environmental impact, and here we scored well. Our resource use was low by Western European standards, as were our carbon emissions (though nobody counted them then). We ran one 2CV Citroën car between the four of us and didn’t travel far. We never flew and were most likely to hitchhike on long journeys. Beyond that the only fossil fuel consumption was a few litres of paraffin, and perhaps a bottle of gas a year between us. We looked into re-energising the bottom mill with a Pelton wheel to produce electricity, but it was a prohibitively expensive investment for the modest amount of electricity we needed.

Instead we fitted out the Citroën with two 12-volt batteries, one of which was charging while the other was used to power our lights and radio. When we parked the car we plugged the spare battery into the electric circuit with crocodile clips. We had no need of power tools, a pop-up toaster, or a washing machine: there was time enough to drill holes, make toast, and wash clothes by hand.

This low-impact lifestyle was less due to ideology than to the fact that we had a decent bit of land to live on. It was easy for Stewart Brand and others to mock idealistic attempts at self-sufficiency, or to portray the back-to-the-land movement as a way of burying one’s head in the sand. Maniac Valley was naive and often shambolic, but it left me in no doubt that having secure access to land is the best way to keep the rapacious treadmill of consumer capitalism at a distance. It is also worth noting that whereas *The Whole Earth Catalog* has been out of print for many years, John Seymour’s *Complete Book of Self-Sufficiency* was republished in a new edition in 2019. 🌱

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*Simon Fairlie worked for 20 years variously as an agricultural labourer, vineworker, shepherd, fisherman, builder, and stonemason before being ensnared by the computer in 1990. He was a co-editor of The Ecologist magazine for four years, until he joined a farming community in 1994 where he managed the cows, pigs, and a working horse for 10 years. He now runs a micro dairy at Monkton Wyld Court, a charity and cooperative in rural Dorset. Simon is a founding editor of The Land magazine, and he earns a living by selling scythes. He is the author of Low Impact Development: Planning and People in a Sustainable Countryside (1996), Meat: A Benign Extravagance (2010), and his latest book Going to Seed: A Counterculture Memoir (Chelsea Green, 2022).*





# Dandelion Seeds

By Sylvan Bonin



When I was seven my parents divorced. They had a bizarre custody plan in which my brother and I alternated a year together with our dad, and a year with our mom. The years with my father were hardest for me. He has a heart as big as the world...but no sense of perspective. He would let his children go hungry while he ran political campaigns. He donated to environmental issues but wouldn't buy me underwear. Over and over again I quoted "Think globally, act locally" and told him that home was the most local, the most important. Nothing ever changed. It left me with a strong commitment that whatever activism I engage in, it is *never* at the cost of those closest to me.

Here at Songaia Cohousing we are always looking for the right balance between nurturing ourselves and each other...and being of service to our region, world, and causes. Pragmatism and idealism tug me back and forth. I have the usual Gen-X cyni-

cism about being able to make any difference in a world run by money. Sometimes I want to just find a piece of land, hunker down, invite some friends, and protect what's within my reach. Other times I think that if I worked full-time on universal health care and climate resilience, maybe, just maybe, I could get someone in power to listen.

In the end the lesson I learned from my father is the weightiest: take care of your "family" first (however you define



it). Yet I *want* to serve the greater good!

Living in an Intentional Community can be a revolutionary act all on its own. Songaia is part of a growing regional network of farms, communities, and businesses in Snohomish County, Washington. We focus on regenerative agriculture, consensus, communication, healthy eating, local food webs, “right livelihood,” ecosystem restoration, and resilience. We often support each other’s businesses, teach classes together, and share interns and volunteers.

I have come to see all of the people whose lives we touch as seeds that we send off into the world. They carry with them the ideas and confidence that this community nourishes. Every year we host three to 10 interns, volunteers, and WWOOFers. We work with local colleges that have classes in sustainable design or ecosystem restoration. We invite people from the broader community to come play in our dirt and share meals with us.

These people come to us at all stages of life and for all sorts of reasons. Some have arrived hurting and broken and needy, then left healed and ready to give. Some have arrived as green youth, then left as adults. Many come already knowing what they want to do and just needing a push or a confidence boost. More often than not they teach us as much as

## Dandelion Seeds

I call them Dandelion Seeds:  
Interns, volunteers, students, guests  
Young folk living out of vans  
Shiny college grads not yet sure where they belong  
Mothers with children grown, more love still to give

Bringing with them  
Curiosity and questions  
Openness and vision  
Hungry for ways to serve  
Asking us to teach and share  
Offering up  
Knowledge and skills  
Sweetness and love  
Strength and enthusiasm  
Hearts full of  
Inspiration and ideas  
Healing and life  
Story and art

Mother said  
We change the world  
One mind  
One heart  
At a time

Fertile soil of community  
Dandelions grow  
Seedleaf to blossom  
Lifting hearts with yellow blooms  
Each sunny flower  
Open for one day

This garden grows more than food  
Songs and well water  
Nettles and fresh figs  
Deep soil nurturing  
Healers and warriors  
Scientists and pioneers

After feeding bees  
Flowers close  
Go inside, sit in silence  
While the seeds mature  
When sepals open:  
Transformation!  
Gone are golden petals  
Each Seed  
Carries a tiny delicate crown  
Feathers that lift into the wind  
Seeds leave to change the world

—SB



Photos courtesy of Sylvan Bonin



## This Land Is Not Your Land

*I wrote the following with apologies and respect to Woody Guthrie. He was a great man and did a lot to further social justice. But, as another great singer said, "the times they are a-changin'." The words that Woody Guthrie wrote don't seem right anymore. I think that he'd have approved of my changes if he were alive to see the times we are living in.*

This Land is not your land, this Land is not my land  
From Mattole Land to the Nauset Islands  
From the Tsnungwe Forests to the Kiskiak Waters  
This Land was made for people to be free

As they were boating that Snohomish river  
They saw above them an endless skyway  
They saw below them the Salish Seaway  
This Land was loved by people who were free

They hunted and rambled and left soft footprints  
To the sparkling snowfields of East Skykomish  
While all around them Native voices were singing  
This Land will always be for people who are free

When Orcas came shining and they were fishing  
And the Camas fields waving and high clouds rolling  
Native voices were chanting as the fog was lifting  
This Land was tended by people who were free

When the ships came sailing and Whites came trading  
When Wheat was planted and canons came rolling  
Native voices were chanting as the tide was rising  
This Land has enough for us all to be free

There was a treaty that tried to stop them  
And signs and laws made for private property  
And in three centuries of endless battles  
This Land was taken from people who were free

On Winter mornings, in the shadow of steeples  
I've seen them gather to share their culture  
As they are drumming and teaching their language  
Trying to find Land for people to be free

This Land is their Land, this Land is shared Land  
From Tolowa Dee'ni to Hatteras Islands  
From the Makah Forests to Mi'kma'ki Waters  
This Land is still loved by people who aren't free

—SB

we teach them! It's a delightful process of discovery and surprise as we get to know each other's talents and stories. They bring skills as diverse as they are: music, education, pouring concrete countertops, soil science, carpentry, somatic healing, art, massage, chemistry, and spoken word poetry, to name just a few.

As Autumn comes on and the rain begins, just as flowers release their seeds for next year, our "Seeds" move on. I call them Dandelion Seeds because Dandelions grow in places that have been disturbed, places where other things won't grow, places that need healing. "Weeds" are pioneer plants whose ecosystem function is to cover bare soil and revitalize depleted soil. Many of the people who come here go to the hard places to do the difficult work.

Letters from our "Seeds" always bring smiles. We pin them to the bulletin board in the Common House. We discuss them over dinner. Their letters are full of curiosity about the world, love and compassion for all in it. They all still love to get dirt under their fingernails. Sometimes they come back to visit. Sometimes we travel to visit them. A couple have even returned to live here! Wherever they go they remain part of our Songaia "family."

Here are just a few examples of what our "Dandelion Seeds" are doing now: Eliza lives on an arid farm in Oregon. The soil is cracked and hard. Her rigorous science background informs her tests of dryland farming techniques. Larry has used the seedsaving and cloning techniques he learned while here to turn a suburban lawn into a food forest. He shares plant starts and harvest abundance, uniting his neighbors with the love of growing and eating together. Raffa, Stephen, and Alex are all off at different universities earning advanced degrees. They work to bring more science and data into our relationship with the Earth. Songaia has even shown up in a couple of academic papers! John has been traveling in Central and South America, serving up art alongside food in villages and orphanages. Kelly, a dietetic intern, now provides healthy food and nutrition advice to isolated seniors in Kentucky.

For each of the last five years at least one of our interns has decided, come Autumn, to stay. We don't always know where they will live but somehow we always find room. It is both a blessing and a heartache to have such wonderful people here for such a fleeting time. Friendships form. Lovers connect. Collaborations are born. I feel guilty wanting them to stay. The world needs them.

It is hard to let go of these bright sparks of life. But seeds are for spreading! 🌱

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*Sylvan Bonin lives at Songaia Cohousing, near Seattle, Washington. She spends most of her time gardening, cooking for the community, putting up the abundance of the garden and orchards, building and fixing things, and teaching edible wild foods and mushroom foraging. Between "suburban homesteading" and building community, she makes as much time as possible for art and dancing.*

# Building Bridges

## Nishenanim nisek hum k'awi

### This is our Homeland

By *Jacque Bromm and Deanna Bloom*



*Sign at entrance to Wolf Creek Lodge.*



*Jacque (in blue) and Deanna crossing suspension bridge on the Tribute Trail.*

Susan Pollard

In the Winter 2010 edition of *COMMUNITIES*, our neighbor Suzanne Marriott authored an insightful article entitled “The Making of Senior Cohousing: The Story of Wolf Creek Lodge.” In the concluding paragraph of that article, Suzanne wrote, “Our vision is to live the rest of our lives as active members of a vibrant community of elders, dedicated to developing insight and wisdom in order to benefit ourselves as well as the larger community: from our lodge to our city to our state and nation, to the earth that we honor and depend upon.”

Many of our current community members happily moved into Wolf Creek Lodge when it was completed in October 2012. We will be celebrating our 10th anniversary of living in this unique community which addresses the social and ecological challenges of the 21st century. We are inundated with information nowadays telling us that living in isolation is detrimental to seniors. Senior cohousing solves that problem with the emphasis on privacy in our individual homes and community at our doorsteps.

In senior cohousing, or as we call it, active adult cohousing, we want to build relationships, make connections, and create and honor bridges. As Suzanne commented earlier, we can benefit ourselves as well as the larger community. We like to call it “Building Bridges,” and this article involves more than one kind of bridge. As members of Wolf Creek Lodge, we consider ourselves “like-minded” and enjoy many similar activities in-

cluding common meals, game playing, book clubs, concerts, volunteering in our local community, cycling, snow sports, and hiking. Hiking and walking are major components of how we are alike at the lodge.

We have a beautiful, serene path along our namesake, Wolf Creek, right outside our door. Hiking along the creek has become a daily activity for many of us. We two neighbors, Deanna and Jacque, have enjoyed hiking here and on other trails which are plentiful in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. On one of our hikes we encountered a sign with the following:

We Acknowledge That The Nisenan People Are Still Here Among Us Today, Though Nearly Invisible. We Understand That We Are On Nisenan Land That Was Never Ceded And The Original Tribal Families Have Yet To Recover. As A Resident In Nisenan Land, We Support The Nevada City Rancheria Nisenan Tribe In Efforts To Stabilize Their People As Well As Their Campaign To Restore Federal Recognition.

After reading that acknowledgment, we started to wonder: When we step onto the pine-needle-laden creek trails so bountiful in our neighborhood, what steps preceded ours on this trail? What eyes have delighted in the glorious yellowing of the big leaf maple trees in the beautiful foothill autumns? Who else has enjoyed the soothing scents of pine? The gurgling of the creek splashing over the rugged rocks? Bird songs? Bugs buzz-





*Trail marker for Daspah Segu Trail on path near Wolf Creek Lodge.*

Deanna Bloom

ing? Cool breezes gently touching our cheeks? All this hiking is making us hungry. Which makes us wonder: What about the Nisenan's food source?

On another glorious day of hiking, we passed a lone fisherman on the trail with nets and rod in hand. We asked if he had caught anything. He replied, "No, but I'm fishing!" Brown trout have occasionally been sighted swimming down the creek. However, during the heyday of the Nisenan's population here, salmon were known to be plentiful. Fish were a major source of food for the Nisenan. They used nets, spears, and even the powder from the soaproot plant. The plant powder, thrown into the waterways, would temporarily stupefy the fish so they could be caught by hand and put into baskets. What an immensely better way to catch fish instead of using spears and hooks! Black oak acorns were also a favored staple of the tribe and symbolic of tribal life. We acknowledge the Nisenan by placing a small basket of black oak acorns on the fireplace mantel in our common house.

The information that we were gaining encouraged us to research our newly found progenitors even more. We visited a local museum, chatted with tribal leader Shelly Covert, and immersed ourselves in research. What we have found is that the best way to know the Nisenan is to walk their trails. We walked the Tribute Trail; it leads to a memorial Nisenan Garden that includes a soaproot plant. It is so much fun to learn how our local indigenous neighbors have used all the native plants in their everyday lives.

The Nisenan Tribute Trail includes a suspension bridge which we needed to cross to see the Nisenan Garden on the other side

of the bridge. Well, one of us (Jacque) had difficulty crossing this bridge because it was swinging in the wind and the crashing creek was way too far below. Fear of heights can be so disabling. Just imagine those suspension bridges crossing the mass canyons in the foothills of Nepal. Crossing our Tribute Bridge was not in the mix today. We had to turn back and retrace our steps.

So, crossing a suspension bridge is hard? What did the Nisenan have to encounter?

For more than 13,000 archeologically documented years, the Nisenan made their lives in the Wolf Creek Lodge watershed area. During the thousands of years that the Nisenan lived in our homeland, they continued to reshape their society, keeping the Earth at the center point of all experiences and responsibility.

The "Gold Rush," called the "Great Destruction" by the Nisenan, was the most violent upheaval of their way of life. Tens of thousands of immigrants and emigrants surged into the foothills of Northern California after gold was discovered in Nisenan waterways. The animals, plants, and waters were destroyed and everything that enhanced the Nisenan way of life was annihilated overnight.

The Nisenan once had a reservation in Nevada City called the Nevada City Rancheria. It was terminated in 1964; at that time the Nisenan lost their federal recognition. Between 1913 and 1964, the Nisenan were "granted" federal recognition through Woodrow Wilson's executive order. Bluntly translated, the president "gave" a 75 1/2 acre reservation called the Nevada City Rancheria to the Nisenan. The term Rancheria was created to name Native American reservations in California. However this



federal “relationship” was “terminated” through the California Rancheria Act that began in 1958; the Nisenan’s Rancheria was subsequently terminated along with 43 other California Rancherias.

The California Heritage Indigenous Research Project (CHIRP) was created to research, document, preserve, and protect Nisenan culture. CHIRP has an important role in building support and visibility for the Tribe as it seeks restoration of its federal status. The Tribe continues its culture and is living here in their ancestral homelands today. We can learn so much from our local indigenous people. To them, the land is sacred. It provides a livelihood. It gives us an understanding of the place to which we belong. It allows us, over generations, to know how to live with the land, how to gather things, how to use it so it is not depleted. And this allows us to have a sacred bond with the land.

We are building bridges to support CHIRP, and you may be asking—what about the suspension bridge? On another day, the two of us attempted crossing the Tribute Bridge and locating the Nisenan Garden. It was essential for Jacque to follow Deanna, looking just at her back while crossing the bridge. “Don’t look over the hand rails and down to the ravine!” was repeated over and over. We made it!

Enjoying another daily walk along Wolf Creek, we spotted a new sign—“Wolf Creek Community Alliance Restoration Team at work removing weeds and planting native plants. NISENAN GARDEN.”

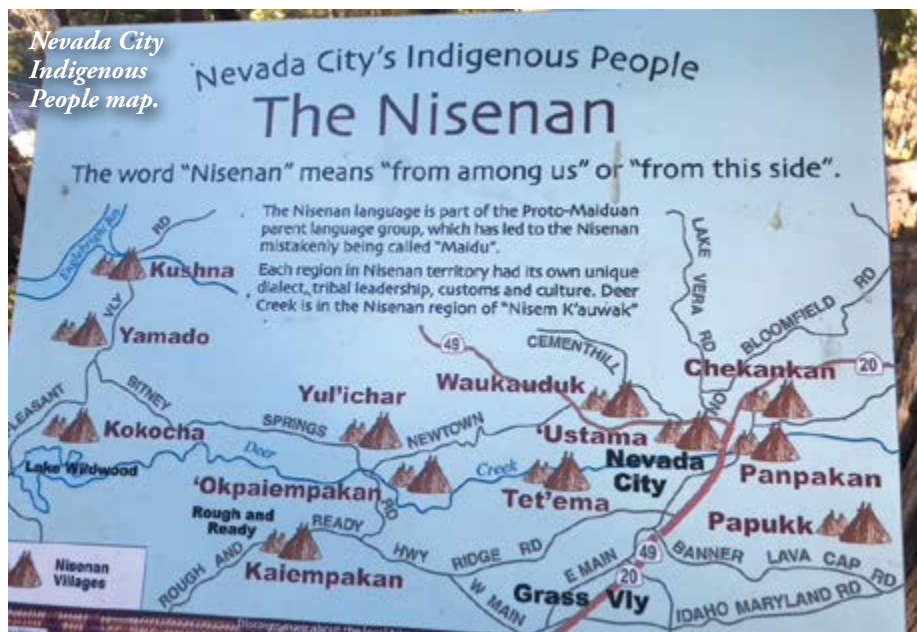
Contact information was provided near the sign and we intend to contact Josie to become involved in the Restoration project. We continue to cross bridges and, to quote Suzanne again, remain “dedicated to developing insight and wisdom in order to benefit ourselves as well as the larger community: from our lodge to our city to our state and nation, to the earth that we honor and depend upon.” 🌸

*Jacque Bromm and Deanna Bloom are members of Wolf Creek Lodge cohousing in Grass Valley, California. See [www.wolfcreekalliance.org](http://www.wolfcreekalliance.org), [chirpca.org](http://chirpca.org), [nisenan.org](http://nisenan.org), [www.wolfcreeklodge.org](http://www.wolfcreeklodge.org).*



*Tribute Trail sign.*

Deanna Bloom



*Nevada City Indigenous People map.*

Deanna Bloom



*Irene, a WCL member, on the Daspah Seyo Trail while Deanna crosses Little Wolf Creek near Wolf Creek Lodge.*

Susan Pollard





# On Placemaking and Butterflies



By Daniel Greenberg

In 1997, while I was leading a semester college program in Auroville, an international community of 3,500 members in south India, our group spent a week in the neighboring state of Kerala with Satish, Chandran Nair, a renowned ecologist. On a hike in a remote jungle, he pointed to some fresh tiger scat and casually remarked, “This cat knows we’re here.” What had seemed like a normal forest suddenly felt foreign and scary.

That evening, Satish spoke about some nearby indigenous hill tribes he worked with that had still not come into contact with westerners. He then passed around some local plants and described research that demonstrated how their medicinal properties were particularly effective with these tribes. He was telling us that these people had actually co-evolved with their local flora over millennia. I remember thinking, “Now *that’s* living in place!”

My next thought was, “But where are *my* plants?” I chuckled when the first image that came to mind was of a Wandering Jew. I’ve visited over 100 intentional communities and ecovillages and have lived and worked in over a dozen. They’ve all felt like home...for a while, and even still...but something always seems to uproot and transplant me in new soil.

I’m often curious how community members spread out along several continuums. For example, some folks are fully committed to the *process* of decision-making. They might say things like, “I don’t care if it takes all night, I want everyone to feel okay with whatever color we choose to paint the common house.” On the other end of this spectrum, there are members who are more *product* oriented and who might declare (perhaps at 2 a.m.), “Screw it! No more meetings! Let’s just start painting!”

Similarly, some members like things just the way they are and don’t want to cut another tree or accept another member; others (myself included) tend to focus on what the community might become, which can feel uncomfortable and threatening to those just wanting some peace and quiet.

And then there’s the continuum of placemaking. We all know, and perhaps count ourselves among, community members who want to sink deep roots into the land and create a

sense of home. Like busy beavers, they plant gardens, engage in local and community politics, and rarely travel. They are often the backbones of their communities and help to anchor them in place. I honor and cherish these community mates and often wish I could be one of them. But that’s not me.

I think I’m more of a butterfly. My first venture into community life was in a Westfalia campervan, when in 1989/90 I traveled to around 30 intentional communities across the US and Canada to collect data for my Ph.D. thesis on children and education in these settings. I discovered both a diversity of cultures and a unity of purpose that laid the groundwork for my continuing relationship with community living. I always seem to be seeking commonalities and building bridges across communities and oceans.

Even when I lived at Sirius Community in western Massachusetts for 17 years, helped build our sauna and cob house, and joined the local School Board, most of my energies were focused elsewhere. I had the good fortune to start and lead a nonprofit called Living Routes, which partnered with UMass-Amherst to run study abroad programs based in ecovillages around the world. From 1995 to 2012 I directed programs at ecovillages in Scotland (Findhorn), India (Auroville), the US (Sirius and Ecovillage at Ithaca), Mexico (Huehucocoyotl), Australia (Crystal Waters), and Israel (Kibbutz Lotan), as well as communities in Senegal, Costa Rica, and Peru.

It was incredibly gratifying to witness over 1,500 students participate in these immersion experiences and wake up to new possibilities, both for themselves and for the world. It’s like each community is singing a song or telling a story that can only be heard once you’re “in it.” And these songs and stories then become a part of us and we carry them wherever we go.

From 2015-2019, I had the privilege of serving as President and Chairing the Board of the Global Ecovillage Network. The Board was comprised of two representatives from each of the GEN Regions (North America, Latin America, Europe, Africa, and Oceania/Asia, as well as youth from NextGEN). Having become friends with most Board Members at various inter-community gatherings and meetings around the world, I came to realize my closest community has always been with other

“butterflies” who have dedicated much of their lives to building this global movement of living well and lightly together.

And it is becoming easier. I remember in the early days of serving as President of GEN, at least a third of the time in each of our monthly meetings was disrupted by unreliable internet and conferencing platforms (we tried them all!). I think it was sometime in 2017, when I paused a meeting just to notice that we hadn't experienced a computer glitch in months. Our frequent cries of “Sorry, I was cut off. Can you hear me now?” had melted away and we were finally able to just be with each other. We moved beyond being (often frozen!) images on a screen. We became family.

Speaking of family, I recently held a virtual memorial service for my mom and was deeply moved by the love expressed by 40 of her closest friends and relatives. I've also started participating in online communities of practice that are exploring how to develop a sense of unity with each other and all life. It amazes me how I can feel so seen and connected to others from all over the globe simply by looking into their eyes on a computer screen.

Imagine what the future might hold. To be clear, I'm not a big fan of Mark Zuckerberg or his vision of the metaverse, but I do believe technology will increasingly allow us to connect with each other in virtual places that feel ever more real and meaningful. We've experienced how the pandemic has so quickly made everyone “Zoom literate.” What's next?

Here's one example. I've led a number of Council of All Beings, which is a communal ritual developed by Joanna Macy where participants let go of their human identity and speak on behalf of another life form. We each spend time connecting to some aspect of the natural world and then create a mask or

costume to represent that being. It can be quite powerful to share with others (as well as a representative “human”) from the perspective of a being in the wider community of life.

I imagine a not-too-distant future where we might hold a Council of All Beings in a virtual space that could include participants from around the world. Rather than wearing masks, we could literally appear to each other as a jaguar, a banyan tree, a river, an eagle.... Perhaps our council could be around a fire, but floating in space with the Earth below us. Maybe our voices are even modulated to better convey the beings we are representing. I know this may sound crazy, perhaps even anathema to some, but I do believe we are entering a time when our very concepts of place and community may need to be redefined.

In the end, I feel this is a both/and rather than an either/or situation. I highly value living in place and actually believe the future of humanity depends on all of us creating deeper relationships with our lands and our neighbors. AND...I also highly value living in *places* and building bridges and a sense of global citizenry creating common visions and practices for a better world. These are not mutually exclusive endeavors and, in fact, can support each other and build on each other. Ultimately, embracing this continuum of placemaking allows the full spectrum of ourselves and our communities to shine forth. 🌊

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*Hopeful utopian, world traveler, ecovillage educator, so-so guitar player, mostly vegetarian, audiobook narrator, swimmer, GEN-US council member, and proud papa of two daughters (one in Ontario and one in Auroville), Daniel Greenberg is always in search of evolutionary relationships and communities that support us to become the best versions of ourselves.*



Photos courtesy of Daniel Greenberg



# My Story As Told By Land\*

*\*with a nod to David James Duncan, whose book My Story As Told By Water is highly recommended to anyone who is also convinced that “I” and the natural elements are not easily separable*

By Chris Roth



Photos by Nancy Roth (see [gen-us.net/nancyroth](http://gen-us.net/nancyroth))

**Editor’s Note:** In recognition of COMMUNITIES’ 50th anniversary year, we are continuing to dig into the last five decades of published writings within the communities movement. Once again this issue we’re republishing a long, theme-related piece from Talking Leaves: A Journal of Our Evolving Culture, produced by Lost Valley Educational Center (Dexter, Oregon) from 1998-2006.

My present-day reflections on the article follow it. Lengthy and at times as unnecessarily apologetic (and unapologetic) as it is, I am leaving it intact, trusting that it will have value for at least some of those who decide to take the deep dive.

This article originally appeared in Talking Leaves, Volume 14, Numbers 1 and 2, Spring/Early Summer 2004, whose theme was “Person and Place: Adventures Here, There, and Everywhere.” See [gen-us.net/talkingleaves](http://gen-us.net/talkingleaves).

On a mid-March afternoon, I sit on the south steps of a small cabin attached to a yurt. Bathed in dappled sunlight, I am looking out over Lost Valley Educational Center’s tree-ringed meadow, where countless camas bulbs, dormant below the surface over winter, are now readying themselves for bloom. The violet-green swallows returned just yesterday, and spent this morning scouting out nesting spots. A greater variety of bird song greets us almost every day this time of year—a nuthatch is calling right now—and one by one the spring wildflowers also show themselves: spring beauty, trillium, violet, coltsfoot, chickweed, cress.... From where I sit at the moment I can watch bees, spiders, several species of beetle, and various small unidentified insects making their rounds. The clear blue skies, the fresh air, the gentle breezes, and lengthening days of sunshine are enough to make one forget that the rains are likely to return, many times, before summer. I feel peace, openness, possibility, new life, and growth already starting all around me, and preparing to burst forth even more abundantly as winter continues to recede.

• • •

In my first draft of this essay all of the “I’s” in that initial paragraph were surrounded by quotation marks—but I have removed that punctuation as needless clutter

and distraction. However, my reasons for qualifying the term “I”—for emphasizing its “(or so we call it)” nature—are still valid:

1. I have started to suspect that, to paraphrase John Lennon (who said “God” instead of “I,” referring to the other side of the same equation), “I” is a concept by which we measure our pain.” “I” implies separation, duality (I and everything-but-I), which is not what I feel at the moment, sitting here on the edge of this meadow.

2. Perhaps more directly to the point in terms of this essay, “I” cannot be divorced from the land on which that “I” is participating in life. “I” is not a wholly independent, easily transposable, separate being, but an outgrowth of the place in which “I” is enmeshed.

This all might sound like some great abstract theory, but it’s merely an attempt to articulate something that runs through my experience much deeper than any concept. I have never been able wholly to separate myself—my thoughts, feelings, perceptions, emotions, and general sense of well-being—from the place in which I am dwelling. Each environment has an energy which becomes part of my energy. Each landscape has messages, wisdom,

and moods that it seems to impart—and not only to me, but to others who open themselves to it.

How much has the land shaped who I am? As western-socialized humans, we tell ourselves many stories about our unique identities. When we attribute aspects of our character to “nurture” (implying acquired qualities) rather than “nature” (innate qualities), we are usually thinking about the influence of our families and social environments, not of our natural surroundings. But is it possible that the land—meaning the entire ecosystem in which we are embedded—is the single most powerful force in shaping who we are and how we experience the world? Even those qualities that we appear to absorb from or develop as a result of our interactions with other people may, on a more fundamental level, be the land expressing itself through larger social units, through our predecessors and fellow dwellers in whatever place we are calling home.

Instead of telling you who I am by referring to my specific interests, activities, accomplishments, failures (the individualistic “ego” perspective) or by referring to the people who’ve been important in my life (the social, but still anthropocentric perspective), it would be interesting to talk about my life as an expression of the places I have lived. I will not deny that I feel a sense of self that transcends

any particular situation I may find myself in, and that this “I that is uniquely I” is continuous for as long as I can remember—nor will I deny that my family and certain individuals and social groups have been integral in shaping who I am. Those things are undeniably true, and I am glad for that. But it seems equally true—although we have not been trained to perceive this—that because we are embedded in places and ecosystems, all of our individual and social expressions are, inevitably, also outgrowths of those larger systems.

So, as an example, I’ll try telling this new kind of life story here, as concisely as I can manage (since my editor is serious about word counts). I have lived almost three-quarters of my life in just three places, where I’ve spent five-plus to 18 years apiece, and have spent the rest of my life in places I stayed for anywhere from a day to two years. I’ll call those three longer-term homes my “primary home landscapes,” and the other significant places I stopped on this journey my “secondary landscapes of influence.” And in case that sounds too humorless and academic, I’ll substitute the terms “Stomping Grounds” (for the longer-term places) and “Stopping Grounds” (for the others) whenever the mood strikes me.

• • •

I moved into the house that became the center of Stomping Grounds #1 when I was less than two years old. I still remember my first visit, when my parents were house-hunting—and my memory is of the basement, which would become the location of many ping-pong games, various construction projects (from a never-to-be-launched wooden raft to a robot made primarily from an art easel and a baby powder dispenser), and frequent leaks and in-seeping of water from the surrounding hillside. The basement was also the pre-existing, semi-indoor equivalent of something that I and my playmates in the neighborhood constantly strove for—digging into the earth, making forts, tunneling through bushes, contacting (and occasionally being overwhelmed by) the natural elements and weather extremes.

My house sat several houses down from the top of a hill in a fairly densely populated New York suburb—a place which, seen from above, probably looked much more like what it actually was: a fairly mature mixed deciduous woodland, punctuated by meadows and waterways. Streets, houses, and manicured lawns were prevalent, but they were hardly the dominant elements of my experience of that ecosystem. Instead, I grew up among many large, old trees, in a landscape peppered here and there with







apparently immovable glacial erratics and other geological features that even modern civilization had not been able to remove. Creeks and rivers still flowed (occasionally underground, but usually in plain sight), and large fields ringed by trees provided ample area for growing children to play ball or frisbee, fly kites, and run around.

Although our lifestyle could hardly be described as “back to the land” (utilities provided our heat and electricity, we bought all of our groceries, and playhouses were the largest things we ever built), we did experience the four seasons in nearly their full force. Deep snows would cause school cancellations in winter, and allow the construction of snow castles, tunnels, and caves; withering heat and humidity in mid-summer, often culminating in thunderstorms, would have us spending days trying to cool ourselves with lemonade and with dips in the municipal swimming pool, and nights sleeping without bedcovers, serenaded by cicadas. Spring was, to quote e.e. cummings, “mud-luscious and puddle-wonderful,” bursting with color after the gray and white winter, and fall was equally colorful as the leaves changed, days shortened, and cool weather returned. Each season was distinctly its own, erasing all memories (at least for a child) of what had come before and what would inevitably come afterward. It was a great environment in which to live in the present—to be a child—to wonder at the nature that was

still quite intact around us.

Growing up in Stomping Grounds #1, I experienced these primary feelings: security, familiarity, the relaxed wisdom of a mature ecological landscape, peacefulness, and the exhilaration provided by changes in the weather and the opportunity to play outside no matter what the season (whether sledding down our hill in winter, playing ball during the long days of spring and summer, or burying ourselves in leaves in the fall). In many ways, I knew my home town better than I’ll ever know any place again. I knew the nooks and crannies of the landscape from a child’s point of view, had access to many more back yards and secret passageways through dense vegetation than most adults will ever have, and most of all, I had time to play, to explore. I did not deliberately avoid streets or houses—that would have been impossible. Instead, I explored my surroundings without judgment, open to the environment in ways that helped me see the life, the opportunities for fun (look, there’s a roof to bounce a ball off of) everywhere around me.

I was also surrounded by one of the densest and most diverse populations of squirrels in the world, many of whom were my close neighbors, inhabiting the tree trunks and limbs, telephone wires, and porch rooftop outside of my second-story bedroom window. Our century-old house seemed to be an open invitation to their scampering, and gave me a living space at a level mid-way up several large trees in our yard.

As I grew up, and as my time was gradually taken over more and more by schoolwork, I still wanted to maintain my connection to place. I joined the cross-country and track teams, which meant that, when weather allowed, I spent most of my afternoons running around outside. I had no interest in getting a car; instead, I bicycled to school every day. When I felt increasingly distant from the childhood spirit of play, I still received emotional sustenance from the land. Just as special locations on the land had drawn me to them as a child, I developed intimate connections with various running trails and bicycle routes in my teenage years. I had never truly known myself as separate from this place. Although my parents, brother, and I traveled perhaps six weeks out of every year (most often to what became our “home-away-from-home,” a friend’s house in New Hampshire’s White Mountains)—my home in New York was the place that I always came back to. It was part of me, and I was part of it.

I believe my experience of childhood would have been wholly different had I grown up in a more recently developed suburb, where the landscape had been scraped clean to make way for houses. I grew up in a place with history—a history that respected the land, that wasn’t driven by a desire to conquer it and change it in order to make a quick profit. When I talk with people who grew up in more modern tract developments, surrounded by strip malls, they express none of the deep connection to place that was

my daily experience as a child. The groundedness that I experienced in the people around me was also in part, I believe, an outgrowth of the place. My companions in those years, like me, spent very little time driving, commuting, or shopping. Most of the time, my schoolmates and even my parents went wherever we were going (which wasn't usually far) on foot or by bicycle.

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Leaving that home landscape was perhaps the most difficult transition I've ever made in my life. I was simply unfamiliar with myself apart from that place. The peace and security, the familiarity, the knowing that "everything is right with the world," the love of place and the opportunities for exhilaration that I'd taken for granted for so long—a result of being embedded in that place—suddenly disappeared. I became hopelessly nostalgic for "lost youth" and for the childhood home that changed irrevocably when my social circle disbursed. Each time I returned during a break from college, I noticed that even the place itself was becoming busier, less relaxed: houses sprang up on formerly open land; traffic increased; and fewer children could be seen playing in the neighborhood. I received many signals that in the modern era, even if you try, "you can't go home again"—not to the same feeling of home and connection you knew as a child. Both the place and I had changed.

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After living my first 18 years in this same town, I proceeded to move from location to location for a decade-and-a-half thereafter, never exceeding two continuous years in any one home until I was 34. Each of my Stopping Grounds along the way helped shape my identity in those years: the dark Pennsylvania woods, hemmed

in by too many poorly-maintained freeways (of asphalt and of human spirit); the expansive, geologically rich, apparently timeless northern Arizona desert, where land and people seem to share the same native wisdom; the remote, gently rolling hills of northeast Missouri, where time stands still in its own way, and where (if one doesn't read the headlines) things can seem to a native New Yorker a little *too* comfortable and self-contained; the artificial flatlands of over-cultivated, chemicalized farm country surrounding an organic farm oasis, where the "modern crisis" is as evident in its own way as it is in any city; and many others, each of which could comprise an essay of its own (but I'll resist for now).

Early on in this journey, two years spent on a traveling environmental school affected me profoundly, as my busmates and I experienced firsthand both the wildness of this continent and the destruction caused by our civilization's ways of living on it. Had I been able to insulate my identity from the land's influence, I might not have experienced such a pow-





erful mixture of, on the one hand, land-identification, a melding-with-everything—and on the other hand, extreme disaffection and alienation at the way in which we humans had set ourselves apart so as to destroy fundamental elements of nature both within and without. I decided to seek out ways of living, places, and people involved in finding a different path forward. I wanted to explore, both on my own and together with other people, how we can bring ourselves back into harmony with the natural world, with one another, and with our essential selves.

The “secondary landscapes of influence” I experienced over the course of many years all drew me in, and each, in its own way, was very difficult to leave. I start to feel at home in any natural setting fairly rapidly. I cultivate my connections with place through various daily activities which assume the position of spiritual practice for me, and all of them involve either exploring or working on the land. These activities (which have included walking, bicycling, running, gardening, and other ways of being outside) are not so much choices for me, as things my body is demanding that I do. They are automatic, second nature, essential to my health and well-being. I wouldn’t trade them—or some palpable form of immediate connection to the landscape—for anything in the world (except perhaps for world peace and universal enlightenment, but I don’t think those would be possible anyway without my getting my “outdoors fix”).

Despite my feelings of connection, I did choose to leave each of these Stopping Grounds—and I believe these choices also reflected the influence of the land. For whatever reasons, my temperament and the temperament of each of these places led us into significant “live-in” relationships that were nevertheless of limited duration. While I felt a resonance in each place between “me” and “everything-else-here,” important parts of me eventually seemed to be missing, and after a year or two I felt a call to move on. Obviously, in each of these places, I also had not developed social connections strong enough for me to resist the pull of whatever new adventure lay ahead. I believe this was no accident either—had I felt that this landscape was indeed my long-term home, I would also have found a greater resonance with others there who felt that way.

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I first encountered what would become Primary Home Landscape #2 when I was 24. I would eventually spend a total of nearly six years living there, spread out over four different stays (two years, then two shorter periods of a few months each, then more than three years). In fact, this essay was inspired initially by a conversation with a current resident of this former Stomping Ground. His description of the influence of the land on the individuals now living there matched my own experience and my observations of the energy of the place as it has impacted hundreds of people over the years (I’ve stayed in touch and visited periodically even when not living there).

Stomping Ground #2 is a 40-acre parcel situated in a western Oregon valley on the east side of the Coast Range. Bisected by a creek, 35 of its 40 acres are forested, mostly with even-aged trees which started growing after a mid-20th-century clearcut. There are very few flat places on the land, and none of any significant size; virtually everything is either uphill or downhill from where one is at any moment. The sides of the valley rise on both sides; there are no wide horizons or long views from ground level. All of this leads to a sensation of being “closed in.”

The land itself is very beautiful, and draws one in powerfully. Even with the recent addition of some relatively conventional buildings (to replace the rustic, handmade, non-code-compliant hobbit huts that preceded them), it still retains the feel of land that is intimately present in the lives of its human inhabitants. The parcel is surrounded on three sides by timber land (with only one immediate human neighbor), with the nearest, dead-end paved road more than half a mile away. Trails both on and off of the property give one nearly endless woods (albeit all impacted in some way by industrial forestry) to explore. On-site, organic gardens, a now sustainably-managed





forest, a nature reserve, and numerous appropriate technology experiments give practical expression to the back-to-the-land ethic and ecological consciousness that have motivated the stewards of this research and educational center since its founding more than two decades ago.

In its early years the group described itself as an intentional community, but more recently has seen itself as a de-facto or “unintentional” community composed of a half-dozen to a dozen staff members of the nonprofit as well as shorter-term participants in its programs. In fact, the group has experienced 100 percent turnover in its composition (or 500 percent, 1000 percent, or more, depending on how one calculates it) since its founding. My five-and-a-half total years as a resident there were a relative anomaly, a duration exceeded by only a few others over the past 23 years. A few months, or a year or two, are more typical. This leads me to believe that the place and I had an unusual amount of resonance, in order for it to feel like “home” to me for so long. I also know that it no longer feels like home to me, and that I can’t imagine my current self being content there.

What are the qualities that those 40 acres bring out in people? Because the place seems so closed in, and because its natural qualities are so immediate and accessible, life there can seem engulfing. I, and other residents, frequently became so absorbed in our immediate surroundings that we lost perspective, forgot that the outside world (including not only other lifestyles and people, but other landscapes) existed at all. In fact, some of us were looking for that highly focused land-immersion experience, and we found a perfect place to enact it. I recall one early resident boasting that he had spent months at a time without setting foot off the property—and this was certainly an option. The work on-site was never-ending, and could (and did) absorb all of my and others’ energies—and then some. Especially in the early years, travel away from the place (especially in an automobile) was discouraged by a common ecological ethic, and both the organization and the land itself seemed to bring out a fierce loyalty within the group of people who chose to immerse themselves in the place.

Had we in fact been able maintain a focused, peaceful, cooperative relationship with our surroundings, we would perhaps have been more content; but in actuality we had not forgotten about the outside world. Socio-ecological awareness was what had brought many of us to choose to invest our energies in this project. For those drawn to this place, guilt about having been raised as “American consumers” was often as strong a motivator as excitement about learning, researching, and teaching the skills of sustainable living. We were there to save the world—which, not surprisingly, can be a rather stressful occupation. In this worldview, life was hard, and was meant to be hard.

The landscape reinforced this message. Every wheelbarrow load of compost, manure, firewood, building materials, or anything else needed to be pushed uphill or restrained from careening away downhill. The lack of open, sunny areas around buildings meant that during much of the year they were damp and cold—a condition exacerbated by the founders’ ideological opposition to the use of insulation, coupled with our understandable desire to conserve firewood. The diminished horizon reduced even further

the already-limited amounts of sun and light available during Oregon winters. Most important, the closed-in feel of living in a mostly-wooded, depressed valley, with no flat areas, no long views, no placid bodies of water, no peaceful, truly “open” spots, seemed to produce a background anxiety that stayed with many of us almost constantly.

Some visitors remarked upon the tension they felt as soon as they set foot on the property. Others believed the place was haunted. The organization itself experienced nearly incessant struggle, both internal and external, which came to be its accepted reality. Communication was often challenging among group members. Internal political and power struggles, culminating in a lawsuit, nearly destroyed the organization in the early 1990s. The court settlement (which resulted in the eviction of a long-time member) was followed by battles with the county over zoning and building codes and another lawsuit brought by a new neighbor. During my final tenure there, two residents were evicted on separate occasions for threatening to kill other residents (luckily, as one staff member was fond of saying, “no one died”). Even among those who didn’t flip out, few people seemed to experience contentment on this piece of land—but perhaps contentment was not what most people arriving there were actually striving for, since “contentment” and “saving the world” are often not conceived of as compatible states of being. For a whole host of reasons, the land and somewhat stressed-out eco-activist types (of which I was one at that point in my life) seemed mutually to call to each other, and to re-





inforce one another's energies.

The place has brought forth many “good works” in the world, and has inspired many people, including me, in positive ways. But nearly two decades of involvement and/or observation, as well as numerous conversations with past and present residents, have led me to believe that these patterns, which I have seen repeating themselves over and over, transcend social factors and the idiosyncrasies of the individuals who participate in this eco-social experiment. They are a product of the land itself, in constant interplay with the people who find themselves drawn there.

My solution? No, I don't suggest bulldozing one of the hillsides to expand the horizon. But awareness is the first step in any healing work, and with a little feng shui brought to bear—as well as a commitment to open communication about how everyone experiences the land and one another—new possibilities can certainly open up there.

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Stomping Ground #3 is Lost Valley Educational Center, where I've been a resident for nearly seven years now. I opened this essay by describing some of the feelings this land evokes in me. Here, as with the place I've just finished discussing, I've heard many different people talk about the same phenomena, with a similar set of feelings (different, however, from those in Stomping Ground #2) evoked in diverse people by this particular environment. Here, too, the conceptual boundaries between “self” and “land” become blurry, and the feelings experienced don't have clear boundaries at all.

Lost Valley has a greater diversity of habitats than Stomping Ground #2 (resembling, in this respect, Stomping Ground #1), and different parts of the land have very different feels to them. A more mature forest surrounds many of the dwelling spaces, while a young, regenerating forest covers half of the property. Large open garden spaces and a large meadow provide the opportunity for a wide horizon, punctuated by tall trees. Our creek flows nearly year-round, and offers a swimming hole. A substantial pond beyond the meadow holds water during much of the year. The meadow itself, and much of the rest of the land, is quite wet during the rainy season. Numerous residents and visitors have remarked on the “watery” quality of the land, and the watery quality of the emotions that it tends to elicit. The place seems to plumb our internal depths, and to encourage reflection, emotional release, and acceptance. In the same way that the “closed-in” feeling of my previous home often evokes that state of being in its human inhabitants, the openness and fluidity of this land tends to bring out those qualities in people just as strongly.

The tense eco-activist who comes here is likely to have her or his defenses crumbled, and to come face-to-face with the feelings of both pain and joy, of separation

and connection, that have produced that way of coping with the world. Obsolete personas and other forms of falsity and self-delusion tend to crumble too. The land not only gives its inhabitants permission to feel—by providing safety, nurturing, inspiration, and its own watery example—but it seems to elicit those feelings in everyone who comes here. It is no accident that Naka-Ima, Lost Valley's most well-known personal growth workshop, has grown and flourished on this piece of land. The land primes people for the experience of opening up, letting go, and finding a new, expanded identity—one that tends to be both more true to each individual's unique, essential nature, and more genuinely connected with other human and non-human strands in the web of life.

In the same way that a “closed-in” energy can repel visitors, this land's open, fluid energy can attract and welcome them—and apparently has always done so. Before Europeans arrived, this was a gathering spot and campground for our Native American predecessors, the Kalapuya, and in more recent times, it was the center of activities for Shiloh, a counter-cultural (yet fundamentalist) Christian organization which trained thousands of its followers here before sending them out to 200 satellite locations around the country. In those days, this property was known as The Land, and was expected to be the site of the Second Coming. Since then, under Lost Valley's tenure, it has continued to attract thousands of people. It maintains friendly relations with most of its neigh-

bors, and a large number of people come regularly and repeatedly to visit and participate in programs—an arrangement facilitated by our relative proximity to Eugene. Such things as car-usage and other lifestyle choices, including engagement in various on-the-land sustainability activities, vary widely among residents and visitors here alike, but on site, the ethics and practices of an ecovillage predominate. As in all of my previous Stomping Grounds (and Stopping Grounds, for that matter), I get around almost all of the time on just foot or bicycle, as do others when on these 87 acres—and we wouldn't want it any other way. When I consider the character of this place—which I've watched under many different circumstances and with many different populations over the years since its founding—it seems clear to me that the land is the most powerful player in what Lost Valley Educational Center is, and in what each of us experiences here.

This open, fluid energy, including this permeability to and interconnection with the outside world, does not necessarily lead to greater stability—in fact, one of the dominant qualities of Lost Valley, from an organizational and social standpoint, is that it is constantly changing and evolving. Since everything seems possible, and since clinging to “old forms” seems unnatural once someone suspects they may be obsolete, we tend frequently to try new ways of arranging our work and our daily community life. And while a closed-in feeling can sometimes lead people to stay in a situation longer than might be healthy for them (since it seems there's no way out), an open feeling can

contribute to much more rapid decisions not just to change something, but to leave, when a resident recognizes that she or he is not happy. A case in point: by the end of this summer, much to my amazement (and occasional distress—I'd like a little more stability), I will be the second-most-senior human resident here. Aside from Stripes the cat and other elements of the non-human landscape, only Dianne, who's been here since she cofounded Lost Valley in 1989, will have been here longer.

The land's fluid qualities have affected me personally as well. Although no one will accuse me of being an overly wild and crazy guy, many of my ideas about life and about myself have loosened up and changed significantly since those relatively closed-in years at Stomping Grounds #2. Guilt, desperate save-the-world ideas, and various “shoulds” have lost their appeal as prime motivating factors in my life. At some point, I noticed that the more energy I put into what I love, rather than into pre-conceived ideas of what would be “good things to do,” the more I find that same energy coming back to me. In contrast to what eventually seemed like the futility of some of my previous forms of struggle, making the choice to follow my heart and do what I love gives me the actual experience of the world becoming a more loving, sustainable place. As of yesterday, I still occasionally fell prey to fear and limitation; I still sometimes struggled in my attempts to open up and be honest when many of my impulses were to censor myself; I still hesitated and found myself erring on the side of caution more than I would have liked. But even as of yesterday, the many wonders of the land here—including its numerous, exuberantly vocal birds, its varied vegetation, its soil, its vistas, and the people it has influenced—had opened me up in ways inconceivable to me a decade ago. And today is a new day—a perspective that is an obvious, palpable reality to me as I experience this place.

A pileated woodpecker is calling, with its almost-human cackle, suggesting to me that, by wrapping up this essay in the very near future, I might still avoid becoming a laughing stock. That's just as well—I've realized that I'm actually more of an amateur naturalist, musician, underground comedian, and person interested in long, wandering conversations, connections with the rest of life, and “being here now,” than I am a writer or editor anyway. For all of this, I have the land to thank. Or maybe I should say “I” have the land to thank...but even that doesn't accurately portray it.

Ultimately, I believe, it is the land, and the spirit behind the land, that are doing the thanking—because in the big picture, in the unity of our differentiated world, nothing seems truly separate from that... (not even that pileated woodpecker, calling again, laughing at my attempts to describe the indescribable)... 🐦

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*At the time of this writing, per his author bio, Chris Roth was editor of Talking Leaves, coordinator of Lost Valley's organic vegetable gardens, a perpetual enrollee in local Lost Creek watershed bird classes, and “recovering, perhaps ungracefully, from a serious case of writer's block.”*





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## My Story As Told By Land: Lessons in the Leaves

As I reread the preceding piece, written 18 years ago, I find it simultaneously dated and fresh. Both I and the world have changed since then, yet I don't think that invalidates its insights. In fact, I've appreciated revisiting it, remembering the experiences I was having then, and also the freedom I felt in writing, which is not as frequently accessible to me now.

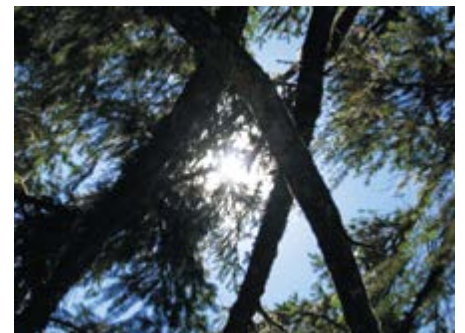
*Talking Leaves* was a very different magazine from *COMMUNITIES*, in that it more closely reflected a specific culture—that of its home community and its specific values and areas of focus (ecospirituality, land-based living, personal growth, permaculture, public service through education). Moreover, instead of drawing submissions from a large list of authors writing from across the broad spectrum of the communities movement, as *COMMUNITIES* does, we received far, far fewer submissions from outside or even inside the community. As a result, a few of us ended up writing a disproportionate amount of the material, and as editor, I was the one who ended up plugging any gaps. I was motivated to write not only by what I had to write about, but by the fact that I had pages to fill.

I find my writing from that time both more self-conscious (frequently diverting into commentary on the writing process itself) and *less* self-conscious (meaning, less concerned about what judgments an average reader might have about it) than it is now. It was much more prone to delving without restraint into personal experiences, feelings, and thoughts, from a very particular viewpoint (my own), and less concerned with speaking from a wider perspective that could be understood and appreciated by a wider range of people. It did not always attempt to relate that experience to human intentional community, even though that was the context from which it was being written; sometimes my relation to the natural world was what I wanted to, and did, focus on almost exclusively. I was not worried about whether I might create the impression of self-absorption; my writing assumed that my experience deserved to be articulated.

It may also have assumed that this experience was either more unique than it was, or more *shared* than it was—I'm not sure. For whatever reason, I was not shy about describing it.

Two years after I wrote the preceding article, I encountered the first of two major physical injuries, spaced 10 years apart (the first to a knee, the second to an ear), which knocked out, first, my ability to garden or hike without limits, and second, my ability to bathe in bird song and other natural sounds, or in natural quiet, without the accompaniment of a constant high-pitched tone in one ear. While the knee is largely healed, the ear isn't, so that my physical experience of the world is permanently changed, and along with it, my ability to lose myself in it. I am much more aware of people's and the world's suffering than I was during the years of *Talking Leaves*, and much more desirous of tuning *out* some of my own experience—and instead tuning *in* to others' experiences—than I was then.

My own focus shifted over time, from seeking connection to the land and the cosmos on an intensely personal level (within the context of my community's social web) to recognizing that this degree of self-focus had been a dead end, time-stamped along with my own unimpaired physical capacities (which, for each of us, age if not injury eventually eliminates, either slowly or suddenly). My own daily







activities shifted significantly, from finding bliss in the garden and on forest trails, quite frequently alone, and then transferring those experiences to writing, to finding ways of being of service to others, and losing myself as often as I could in *their* worlds rather than my own. This included shifting much of my daytime focus to childcare and eventually to volunteering in an elementary school, settings in which long monologues would be laughable. This shift also coincided with my putting a lot more energy, in my role with COMMUNITIES, into helping *other* people tell their stories, rather than so often telling different aspects of my own. Eventually it meant shifting my daytime focus from helping children to helping an elder, when needed by a parent. Now the magazine is helping me stay connected to a world and a broader community outside of this present experience, which is equally intense in its own way.

Glancing back at some of these past writings, I read them in a new way; they feel both familiar and strange. They put me back into those past experiences, and help me appreciate them and the person I was then. They put me in touch with a richness in my life—and in all life—that can often get obscured by the stress of the present moment, by the pain of loss, by the perception that everything important to us eventually slips away. They are exuberant in their own way, to a degree that would be hard for me to conjure now; they are clueless about some things, and wiser than I usually am today about others. I mourn the passing of those days, and I also feel deep gratitude for them.

The accompanying article's descriptions of places are also outdated, at least in their particulars. The old, modest Victorian home of my childhood in a New York suburb (Stomping Ground #1) has since been gutted and expanded into a



mini-McMansion. Most of the yard and the trees that stood in it no longer exist; they were removed by its new owners to make room for a two-car garage, a climate-controlled recreation room in which one never gets rained on while playing, and a deck that never gets muddy the way our back yard did. Much of the dense vegetative cover in and surrounding the valley of Stomping Ground #2 has been removed, thanks to dominant forestry practices, building regulations, and fire-safety codes, creating a lot more openness (and, some would say, barrenness) to that formerly darker, more enclosed space. And Stomping Ground #3 is no longer quite as wet, nor moist for as much of the year, as it was back in 2004, due to the effects of climate change which has made the Pacific Northwest noticeably drier over the past two decades. Moreover, people arriving at those two Stomping Grounds who in the years surrounding the turn of the millenium might have fit the description of “tense eco-activists” may now be holding a slew of additional world problems in constant awareness.

Yet the essential qualities and unique character of each of these different places remain, despite the surface changes. Biology, geology, and “place” are not so easily defeated by human activity. Stomping Ground #1 is still ecologically diverse, despite additional development. Something about Stomping Ground #2 continues to result in both intensity of experience and a pattern of conflict and difficulty for residents (to the point where the place has been sitting mostly empty for a couple years). Stomping Ground #3 continues to attract people to gather, and to experience its healing qualities, even though the landscape is less moist these days, parched more often than it used to be. It is more difficult to forget the dangers facing all of us when a home landscape becomes a tinderbox—and at the same time, while Stomping Ground #3 may offer less comfort about our prospects for the future than it used to, it still brings forth emotional vulnerability and honesty, an inclination to share and deal with both pain and joy with others, in connection with the land and with community—rather than allowing people to bottle them up.

I write these words more than 2000 miles east of Stomping Grounds #3 and #2, and 500 miles west of Stomping Ground #1, but these places remain a part of me, as alive as these words are to me in this moment. 🐦

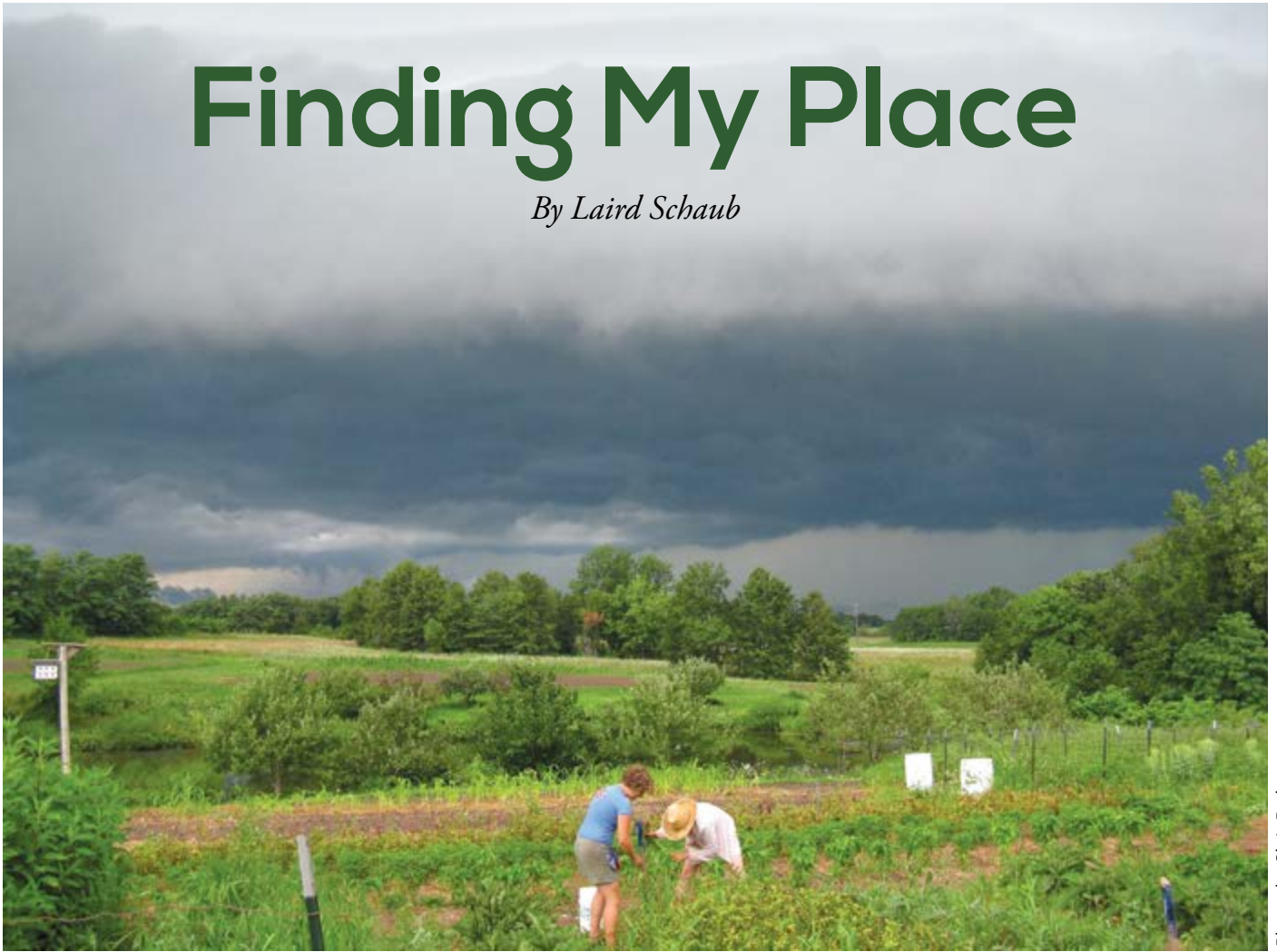
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*Chris Roth edits COMMUNITIES, but he cut his teeth on Talking Leaves. Thanks to the noble (or possibly foolhardy) efforts of [web.archive.org](http://web.archive.org), a link to his writings there can be found at [gen-us.net/talkingleaves](http://gen-us.net/talkingleaves). His previous publishing project, The Beetless' Gardening Book: An Organic Gardening Songbook/Guidebook, is also preserved, for better or worse (we hope it's for better), in near-entirety on that site; see [gen-us.net/beetless](http://gen-us.net/beetless). For one or more print copies of that book (proceeds support COMMUNITIES), please email [editor@gen-us.net](mailto:editor@gen-us.net) for details.*



# Finding My Place

By Laird Schaub



Photos by Chris Roth

**Author's Note:** This article is a lightly-edited composite of three pieces from my blog, "Community and Consensus." The first segment appeared under the title "Home Is Where the Hart Is," December 27, 2009 (see [communityandconsensus.blogspot.com/2009/12/home-is-where-hart-is.html](http://communityandconsensus.blogspot.com/2009/12/home-is-where-hart-is.html)).

I've been living in the same place for more than 35 years. While that statement would hardly qualify as remarkable for most of human history (say, all but the last 150 years of the 200,000 that humans have been on this planet), it is rare today—especially in the US, where we have become a highly mobile society and there is little resistance to scratching the itch of wanderlust. In fact, I know hardly anyone living today in the same place they were living in 1974.

Apropos people *knowing* where they live, there is a great story that historian Jared Diamond tells about traveling in the jungles of New Guinea. The group of locals he is journeying with explores beyond the boundaries of its tribal territory and finds itself unexpectedly needing to bivouac overnight in an unfamiliar location. Needing food, a few break off to forage and return with a quantity of mushrooms. When Diamond expressed his uneasiness over taking a chance on eating fungi gathered in unknown territory, his hosts reply with confusion and disdain, "Why would we feed you poisonous mushrooms?"

The point here is that "civilized" people, such as Diamond (and you and me), have largely been raised without a developed sense of our local environment, and mostly wouldn't know which mushrooms are safe to eat. In contrast, indigenous people tend to be *much* better connected with place and probably have known which wild foods in

their bioregion are safe to eat since they were five years old. Our lives used to depend on that knowledge. And while you might reasonably argue that they still do, few people today are that aware of the place where they live.

For most US residents today, home as it relates to place has come to mean familiar sights and sensations: the unique feel of your own bed; the spot where you drink your morning coffee; the view out the west window at sunset; how rain sounds on the porch roof; the smell of the workshop or the kitchen.

Because my community (Sandhill Farm in rural northeast Missouri) places a high priority on raising the food we eat, I have gradually extended these markers of home to include more subtle signs, gradually extracted from a third of a century of homesteading and paying attention:

- I know within 24 hours when the

spring peepers will emerge from the mud to launch their vernal chorus. More than just monitoring the thermometer, it is a matter of sensing the right combination of warmth, length of day, and rising humidity. My body has come to *know* that combination when I feel it each March.

- I know when to cut hay. While the nutritional value peaks when about 10 percent of the seed heads have emerged from their sheaths, it is more complicated than that. Cool weather grasses like brome and orchardgrass are ready in May, yet that's also our wettest month. If you mow hay on wet ground it will mold from underneath; if you wait until the ground is completely dry, it may be June—and the nutritional value will have plummeted. You have to assess the maturity of the crop, the dampness of the earth, and the prospects for enough sunny weather to cure the crop and get it baled before the next thunderhead spoils the lot. It's a dance.

- How many know the optimum temperature for churning butter? It's 62 degrees Fahrenheit. For 25 years Sandhill had its own dairy herd and I used to make butter a lot. I got good enough at sensing the right temperature that I could tell when it was right just by feeling the side of the churn as the cream gradually warmed on the kitchen floor. Done right, you can turn a gallon-and-a-half of

cream into three pounds of butter in about five minutes. If the cream is too cold it can take 20 minutes; if you let the cream get too warm, the butter won't separate well from the buttermilk and the butter will tend to sour.

- Garlic is one of our culinary staples (we only semi-joke when telling prospective members that we'll support any dietary preferences they have...so long as they eat onions and garlic). While planting garlic is straightforward—pretty much any time before freeze-up will do—the art of being self-sufficient in the stinking rose is knowing when to harvest and how to store your bulbs.

Garlic is ready when the bottom pair of leaves turn brown. Where we live that usually occurs around July 1. Once that time draws near, we pay close attention to the weather, as it's *far* less work if we can get into the field about 48 hours after a good rain. The water will soften the ground (meaning the bulbs can be extracted by hand instead of requiring garden fork assistance), and the two days of sunny weather will mean that most of the dirt can be crumbled off the roots by hand (instead of inheriting gooey mudballs at the bottom of each plant).

After that it takes about 30 days for the bulbs to cure in an outbuilding where summer temperatures and good air flow will gently remove the excess moisture. Then, before the drying goes too far, we trim the bulbs, sort them, and place them loosely in cardboard boxes where they're stored on the concrete floor of an earth-sheltered building. There, cool temperatures, medium humidity, and modest air flow will keep them in good condition until needed—even into the following spring.

- In the US today, where most of the countryside has been thoroughly reconfigured by modern agriculture, the two largest undomesticated fauna remaining in northeast Missouri are wild turkeys and white-tailed deer. The combination of low human density (our county has a lower population than the high school I attended in suburban Chicago) and plentiful woodlands (covering more than 10 percent of the land) makes ideal habitat for these species.

In fact, in recent decades the population of both turkey and deer has increased, to the point where some locals earn more from renting ground to out-of-state hunters than from farming. When it's not firearm season for deer, I enjoy walking in the woods, looking for deer trails and where they bed down for the night. In the spring, I can find clutches of wild turkey eggs by watching where the hens flare up from their nest when I wander too close while stalking wild morels.





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Accumulation of this knowledge of place has been gradual for me, and I didn't start with that intent in mind. Nonetheless, these lessons and understandings have become precious to me, and set the stage for a powerful epiphany...

*The next segment was written four years later: June 28, 2013 (see [communityandconsensus.blogspot.com/2013/06/group-works-gaia.html](http://communityandconsensus.blogspot.com/2013/06/group-works-gaia.html)).*

## Viola, Voila!

The most profound thing I've read in the last year was *How It Is*, the collected writings of Viola Cordova, a Native American philosopher (1937-2002). She was a Jicarilla Apache mixed with Hispanic blood, who grew up in northern New Mexico. She became of professor who studied and taught Western philosophy while articulating Native American philosophy. She did a lot to contrast White/Eurocentric and Na-



tive American cosmologies, and I found her writing inspirational.

Cordova explains that in Native American philosophy there is an emphasis on place, where beliefs about how the world began and what it means are specific to locale and are not expected to be the same everywhere. There is just one Earth, of which we are all a part. There is no heaven; no parallel universes. The Earth is our home (as well as the home of all other peoples and species); it is where we learn the meaning of harmony and coexistence. It is not inherently dangerous.

Humans are a herd animal, where right behavior is best understood in the context of the collective, not as what's best for the individual. When someone acts selfishly they are seen as sick, rather than celebrated as entrepreneurial or institutionalized as crazy.

At best, we are in transition from the worldview of humans-as-lords-of-the-universe (a right bestowed upon us expressly by an omnipotent European God, who exists in a non-temporal plane of reality).

It is against this background that I approach the concept of Gaia—the Earth as a living entity. In this context, it is not merely about creating a pleasing local atmosphere; it's about invoking a reminder of what I'm aspiring to live by—a recognition of our rootedness in the Earth and the paramount importance of having our decisions and our behaviors informed by that life-sustaining connection.

To be sure, invoking nature can be accomplished in an amazing variety of ways: with song, with raiment, with an altar of natural objects (imbued with personal meaning), or simply by walking the land or looking out the window.

I want to make clear that I am not claiming any Native American heritage. I am merely saying that Cordova's illumination of Native American philosophy makes more sense to me than Western cosmology and it has been incredibly validating to discover that my personal journey of exploration at Sandhill inadvertently recapitulated a long tradition of what constitutes right relationship between humans and the natural world.

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The last segment is excerpted from my blog of December 7, 2017 (see [communityandconsensus.blogspot.com/2017/12/the-role-of-stories-in-cooperative.html](http://communityandconsensus.blogspot.com/2017/12/the-role-of-stories-in-cooperative.html)).

## Stories in Cooperative Groups

In my experience it is normal for conflicting stories to surface in the context of problem solving—not every time, but often. Even though cooperative groups are usually founded on the bedrock of explicit common values and a unifying vision, people are not clones and it's naïve to be surprised by the emergence of divergence.

Can conflicting stories coexist? Good question. According to Viola Cordova, it is considered normal among Native American tribes to each have a unique origin-of-the-world story, all of which are place specific. There is no impulse for one tribe to feel threatened by another tribe's differing story. Struggling to define and control orthodoxy is an inclination peculiar to Europeans. Since US culture is dominated by European thought and tradition, most of us have learned to be uneasy in the presence of conflicting stories. Our tendency is to let proponents fight it out until one prevails—like two queens in a beehive. My point is that it's a choice to be intolerant of conflicting stories, not an inherent human response.

It's my view that we'd be better off if we resisted the temptation to fight for control of the frame of reference, and learn how to work with the phenomenon of multiple stories constructively. By succeeding at that, we open ourselves up to the benefits of parallax, and a richer field of perspectives with which to see a situation and its possibilities. This translates to less time in the ditch (squabbling over control of the story) and more time making progress on the road to heaven (finding a solution that works well for all). So



the stakes are high.

I am frequently asked what it takes for cooperative groups to succeed, and my best answer is developing the social skills of the members. (For more on this, see my blog of November 30, 2013, "Gender Dynamics in Cooperative Groups," [communityandconsensus.blogspot.com/2013/11/gender-dynamics-in-cooperative-groups.html](http://communityandconsensus.blogspot.com/2013/11/gender-dynamics-in-cooperative-groups.html).) One of the key elements of this is the ability to shift perspectives—to see an issue through others' eyes. Or to put it another way, the capacity to hear and respect stories about what's happening that are different from our own.

While this may not seem like a large ask, it turns out to be harder than you think, especially when the stakes are perceived to be high. Too often, in the heat of the moment, the dynamic becomes a battle over which version of reality will prevail; which story will dominate (if this sounds eerily evocative of the current political climate in the US, keep in mind that I wrote this during Trump's first year in office, when his unbounded capacity for divisiveness and mendacity were not so well established). Participants become consumed with selling their story, rather than becoming curious about how other stories can explain different reactions, insights, and priorities.

There are two challenges here: a) creating a container in which there is explicit room for different realities to be articulated; and b) the skill to hold alternate realities as possibilities, without insisting that only one is possible and devolving into bickering and blinkered thinking.

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Incredibly, by staying in one place long enough, I have been able glean powerful insights from my proximity to nature that help me both understand my place in the world, and export it broadly to one of the major challenges of our times: how to get along with one another. 🌿

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Laird's blog can be found at [communityandconsensus.blogspot.com](http://communityandconsensus.blogspot.com).

Laird Schaub relinquished his membership at Sandhill Farm in 2014. After brief stints at Dancing Rabbit (also in Rutledge, Missouri) and living with close friends in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, he moved to Duluth, Minnesota in 2016, where he lives today in an older residential neighborhood with his partner, Susan, and continues his work as a cooperative group consultant and teacher. He lives across the street from Chester Creek Park and his block is visited year-round by deer, skunks, raccoons, and black bears. Great horned owls nest in the white pines, and occasionally morels pop up in the neighbors' lawns.



# A (Small) Step In The Right Direction

By Jim Senka



Photo courtesy of Jim Senka

A wetland pond on the north end of the property drains through a small creek into the Chase River, which is a productive Salmon habitat. This area is home to a healthy population of Pacific Chorus Frogs and I have recorded 38 native bird species in the area including Wood Ducks, American Goldfinches, Cedar Waxwings, Bushtits, Kingfishers, Fox Sparrows, and Great Blue Herons. I am expecting the population of these native birds to increase after the restoration project takes hold.

Over the previous year we removed invasive plant species which outcompete native plants and support fewer native animal species. There were several invasive plant species (Daphne, English Hawthorn, English Holly, Canary Grass, Buttercup) but the most damaging to our habitat was the Armenian (a.k.a. Himalayan) Blackberry, a particularly aggressive invasive plant. Approximately 600 lbs. of Blackberry “knuckles” (the heart of the plant) were removed in preparation for the reintroduction of native plant species.

Local botanists Sabine Almstrom and Hannah Auer designed a planting scheme with the intention of restoring a diverse healthy ecosystem. With funding from the Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation we were able to purchase 200 trees and shrubs (40 different species). The Nanaimo and Area Land Trust, a local environmental NGO under the leadership of Paul Chapman, provided assistance on several levels including technical advice, administration of the grant funding, location of available plants, and volunteer labor. The planning and preparation (including installation of a temporary deer fence) culminated in an event where presentations were given on the importance of wildlife habitat conservation and planting demonstrations made by several biologists. Then, under the direction of Hanna Auer, the volunteers managed to put the 200 plants in the ground.

It was extremely gratifying to see all the parts of this worthwhile project come to completion and we are looking forward to the area becoming a native wildlife haven. I wish to note also that because of the proximity of this area to our home, a big benefit is that residents including several children are enjoying the excitement of seeing these wild creatures.

I have a keen interest in encouraging others on the Island who either own or are aware of land that can be restored as wildlife habitat to consider a project like this. I will gladly provide basic information and advice on how to set up a similar project in other areas. I can be reached at [info@pacificgardens.ca](mailto:info@pacificgardens.ca) (attention Jim Senka). 🐦

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*Jim Senka is a retired biologist and resident of Pacific Gardens Cohousing in South Nanaimo, British Columbia.*

Urban expansion is a fact of life today and it has its benefits, including providing new housing, sometimes beautifully landscaped, and supporting the local economy. However, there is one very grave aspect to this phenomenon that is often forgotten—that is the destruction of wildlife habitat as we introduce alien flora and domesticate more and more wild spaces.

The importance of wildlife habitat to the planet is universally recognized by the biological science community. To that end, the residents of Pacific Gardens Cohousing in the Harewood subdivision of Nanaimo are committed to having a good portion of our property remain natural. As a biologist and resident of Pacific Gardens, I have been coordinating a multi-year project to preserve or reestablish the natural aspect of approximately one acre of our five acre property.

# 50 Years of Rainbow Gathering Neo-Tribalism

By A. Allen Butcher

It is late morning when I am awoken by the sun warming my tent. I can hear the sounds of children playing, dogs barking, and a droning background noise sounding like traffic in suburbia. Wait, that's not right. Where am I?

Waking up in Kid Village, I am attending a wilderness gathering of the Rainbow Family of Living Light, in 1995, in a National Forest in New Mexico. While Annual Rainbow Gatherings typically involve around 10,000 people setting up primitive camp kitchens, stages, and other attractions, there is no automobile traffic anywhere near the Gathering, as the parking area is usually far away. So, what is that droning noise? The DRUMS! From this distance the drumming at Main Circle sounds much like the noise of urban traffic.

Now it all comes back to mind; and the scene is amazing! It can be cold at night in these mountains, yet people cast off articles of clothing while dancing around the flames. The drumming and dancing around fires, late into the night and early morning, takes place at several different bonfires around the Gathering. After dark the larger kitchens and drum circles at Rainbow Downtown involve hundreds of people milling around several different fire pits, with dancers between the flames and the drummers, and the onlookers behind and above them. The soil dug for the pit is piled up a few feet back from the pit, so that there are two levels of audience around the fire, one standing on the piled-up soil, and the other at ground level. Down in the pit, the Fire Trolls keep the fires burning bright and hot, and keep the dancers safe from falling into the flames, often getting themselves covered with ashes by their work, and causing them to look very much like what one would expect of a troll.

It was still dark when I found my tent earlier this morning, while the drumming continued. Some drummers may not have taken much of a break, and are at it again in late morning, with others joining them. Sometimes the drumming goes on for days, nonstop. Rainbow always attracts the best drummers, and when they play with others in circle the feeling invoked is a fantastic experience of tribal ecstasy.

I slither out of my sleeping bag and crawl out of my tent, dragging my camping pad out to sit on in front of my tent. I usually camp at Kid Village with my child in co's own tent, yet this year I came alone, camping at Kid Village again to help with the kitchen work. My tent is in an aspen grove, on a low rise above Kid Village Kitchen to the right, and a meadow to the left, where children play, and where the whole Kid Village camp forms a circle, holding hands before the evening meal. Prayers, songs, and announcements are shared by all, with most of the major camps and kitchens doing the same. During these circles the group will usually shout in unison, "WE LOVE YOU!," then listen to hear answering shouts from

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In the Barter Lane, chocolate becomes so scarce and valuable that someone will buy all the chocolate they can find in local towns, then hand it out freely.

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Photos courtesy of A. Allen Butcher





*Kids Parade to Main Meadow,  
West Virginia, July 4, 2005.*



*Bus Village, Wyoming, 2001.*



*Barter Lane, New Mexico, 1995.*

distant camps, “Weee loove youuu!”

This summer will be the 50th Rainbow Family Gathering, returning to Colorado where it began in 1972. Anyone can show up and participate, although the better one is prepared for primitive camping, the more enjoyable will be their experience.

## An Ancient Cultural Memory

Musing among the aspens in Kid Village about how people leave behind civilization to live in a Rainbow Tribe, even for a brief time of gifting and sharing without money or competition, I realize that we are returning to or re-creating the conditions of our prehistory, and that others have surely also had this thought. The experience of community-in-the-wild is a return to what our civilization left far behind. Yet we have cultural memories of a time of peace and plenty, long lost yet not entirely forgotten.

The Roman poet Ovid wrote the narrative poem *Metamorphosis* saying that, “In the beginning was the Golden Age, when [people] of their own accord, without threat of punishment, without laws, maintained good faith and did what was right.... The earth itself, without compulsion, untouched by the hoe, unfurrowed by any share, produced things spontaneously, and [people] were content with foods that grew without cultivation.... It was a season of everlasting spring, when peaceful zephyrs, with their warm breath, caressed the flowers that sprang up without having been planted.”<sup>1</sup>

It would be easy to dismiss Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* as poetic wishful thinking, yet he was repeating what much older legends assert, that the hunter-gatherer lifestyle was not always nasty and brutish. There was a time, long ago, when the living was so easy, and the company so marvelous, that we can still hear the wonderment of that age, echoed down to us today many millennia later. The Hebraic story of the Garden of Eden and other tales dating back to ancient Mesopotamia and late Stone Age Neolithic times all represent other tellings of this “Golden Age.”

Consider how much like the Golden Age are Rainbow Gatherings. Primitive camping at Rainbow is easy-living for a few weeks before and after July 4th in the United States, and at other times of the year around the world, as people bring to the Gatherings kitchen equipment to prepare donated food to be shared by all. Such gifting and sharing among people must be much like sharing the natural abundance of creation in our prehistory.

Ten thousand years ago, people knew how to make fire, as well as most likely how to make drums, and so drumming and dancing around bonfires was very likely enjoyed in the Golden Age much like at Rainbow Gatherings. While agriculture in the modern sense was not yet invented, the dog had already long before domesticated us humans, while the horse would not yet be domesticated until a few thousand years later.

Whatever things people had learned to make during the late Neolithic era, it is like-

ly that they also learned to barter those things amongst themselves. These would be articles of clothing and adornment, and probably things with which to carry other things, like woven baskets. In the midst of a natural world of plenty, the processes of bartering found-things and human-made things was likely already being developed and practiced.

## A Wilderness Training Experience in Basic Market Economics

While there is no use of money for buying and selling at noncommercial Rainbow Gatherings, there is almost always a Barter Lane, where people lay out blankets on either side of a trail displaying their offerings, then carry on incessant haggling over the comparative value of different desirable articles, whether found in nature or crafted by skilled people. Coming together for bartering private property very likely predated agriculture, and was probably as much of an enjoyable pastime in the Golden Age as it is at contemporary Rainbow Gatherings.

Many Rainbow folk dislike the prevalence of Barter Lanes at Gatherings, since it involves an incursion of private property and competition into a gifting and sharing culture, yet the anarchist nature of Gatherings enables bartering, which is one of the main attractions at Rainbow Gatherings. Nearly every sunny day of the Gathering, the Barter Lane is a bustling, colorful feature of Rainbow,

involving hundreds of people at a time.

Even young children enjoy barter, as they learn how to take a few simple things, like a handful of smooth quartz or other stones, and through a succession of clever barter exchanges, haggle their way up to ever more valuable items, until they can obtain an article of clothing or a knife or other commodity they desire. Essentially, the Barter Lane at Rainbow provides for children a wilderness training experience in basic market economics, as they learn about how to buy low and sell high, the discerning of comparative advantage for assigning value, supply and demand, commodity monopoly, and market crash.

Two of the most valuable commodities at Rainbow Barter Lanes are typically the consumables: cigarettes and chocolate. In particular, the value of chocolate tends to become so great in its scarcity that someone will buy up all the chocolate bars they can find in local towns, then bring them in a big clear-plastic bag to Barter Lane to hand out freely, in order to emphasize gifting over bartering, causing a Rainbow market crash in the value of chocolate!

Everyone, even children, can usually understand what is happening in the Barter Lane chocolate market. It undermines the intent of Rainbow gifting, yet while some Rainbow folk complain, even their attempts to thwart the chocolate market end up teaching a lesson in market economics, as well as in subversive market disruption.

## Reclaiming Gifting and Sharing Culture in the Neo-Tribal Rainbow Family

The Rainbow Barter Lane is a reoccurring example of precisely the economic process that evolved from simple barter to indirect barter using commodities such as grain or cattle rather than chocolate, and then metals like gold, silver, and copper. Later, coins were minted, then paper bills were printed, then electronic forms of money created global neoliberal market capitalism, and now digital currencies.

Over and over again, Rainbow Gatherings re-create the conditions of what Ovid and others call the “Golden Age,” and thereby the very processes that set us on the road to civilization as we know it today, while at the same time showing that it takes deliberate intention to reclaim and hold the gifting and sharing culture. Anyone can experience this dynamic simply by attending a Rainbow Gathering.

At Rainbow, Native American culture is a primary influence as many Rainbow folk consider the Rainbow Family to be a neo-tribal culture, comprised of many different forms of gifting and sharing lifestyles. Among other forms of community, contemporary secular and spiritual communal groups attend Rainbow Gatherings, showing how we can choose to live communally in spite of the tendency toward property and competition.

The temporary autonomous zones of Rainbow Gatherings enable us to experience community in a socially and environmentally responsible culture. This experience of cooperative living can help us all to survive and thrive through the present and coming tribulations.

Going through all these thoughts while sitting in the Kid Village aspen grove, I wanted to write this story for sharing with my Rainbow family and others, yet many distractions intervened. The occasion of the 50th Annual Rainbow Gathering in North America, July 2022, provides a good opportunity for presenting how Rainbow culture is a continuing re-creation of the gifting and sharing culture, available to anyone to observe and enjoy today. 🌸

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*A. Allen Butcher is a drummer who has attended 15 Annual Rainbow Gatherings and several Regionals, lived 12 years in communal society, four years in collectives, and is now building an urban, class-harmony ecovillage in Denver, Colorado. Self-published material includes Culture Magic and The Intentioneers' Bible, both available on the internet ([culturemagic.org](http://culturemagic.org) and [intentioneers.net](http://intentioneers.net)).*

1. *Metamorphosis*, Ovid, 43 BC-c. 17 AD, Roman poet, quoted in Claeys, G., & Sargent, L.T. (Eds.), *The Utopia Reader*, New York University Press, New York, 1999, p. 8.



Lodge Circle, Wyoming, 2001.



Rainbow Kitchen, Monongahela National Forest, West Virginia, 2005.



Kid Village, New Mexico, 1995.



# Researching Intentional Communities: A Reflection

By Kirsten Stevens-Wood

## Keeping the door open for research

A researcher and an academic, I've chosen intentional communities as my main area of research. All types of community interest me, from squatting and communes to cohousing and housing cooperatives.

With a background in community development and a personal interest in low-impact development, permaculture, and community, I feel a deep affiliation with this topic. Back in my mid 20s (before I became a lecturer), I dedicated my whole holiday allowance for two consecutive years to WWOOFing. For those unaware, WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) provides a link between organic growers and volunteers. Many intentional communities are also WWOOF hosts.

The first summer my partner and I set off from Bristol, England and after spending two weeks on a Dorset smallholding we made our way to the then relatively new Tinkers Bubble, an off-grid community nestled under dense fir trees, living in benders and other dwellings with small ecological footprints. Their innovative approach to low-impact development especially interested us, and at the time they were the on/off home of Simon Fairlie, the author of a book I still own, *Low Impact Development*, and of *Chapter 7*, a magazine of which I believe I also have some old copies.

I cannot understate the influence this experience had on my partner and me. That same year we spent *all* of our savings on a small woodland in the hope of one day living there. The following year we spent four weeks in the north of Spain visiting various off-grid communities and projects, working, learning, and meeting many fascinating and pioneering groups. I began to notice that there was something interesting and dynamic about collective endeavour that I was not seeing in traditional (non-intentional) communities.

Much like families, intentional communities are usually aware of their idiosyncrasies and are often self-critical whilst at the same time fiercely loyal in the face of external criticism. I am always surprised at the levels of self-awareness that communities often hold about themselves even in times of discord. My experience of communities is that they are often willing to tread in places that others may not, to take collective risks and to be mindful in their practices, but that it is equally true that some skeletons are left in cupboards as too difficult to deal with.

One early piece of research I carried out was to interview a number of founder members from different types of communities to find out if there were any commonalities between them. These founders often described intense planning periods, but also friendships, trust, reliance, and on occasion conflict and disagreements. Many of my interviewees still lived in the communities they had helped to form; a few did not. None of them regretted it.

As part of my PhD I spent all of my non-teaching weeks of the summer of 2018 living with a large community on the east coast of England. I became what is known as a “researcher in



*The author (second left) with Diggers and Dreamers collective (L to R) Chris Coates, Jonathan Howe, James Dennis, Braziers Park, Oxford, 2021.*

residence,” and as such was lucky enough to be absorbed into the day-to-day life of a busy functioning community. In research terms this is known as being an insider outsider—in other words, in an effort to discover the reality of community life, the researcher attempts to blend in and at times disappear.

I don't know if I ever disappeared (or even if this is actually possible), but being able to simultaneously observe and participate in a community is in many ways richer than traditional interviews where the discussions are often led by the questions set by the researcher, and where it is also often the case that the interviewees will feel under some pressure to come up with “answers.” By contrast, ethnography (in theory) allows for much more naturalistic interactions between the researcher and the researched.

In my time with this community I experienced many personal moments of generosity and kindness—from the note slipped under my door one warm afternoon inviting me to make cheese, to a community member organising a film night so that I could watch a series of short documentaries which had been made about the community itself. I had dinners saved for me when I was late back, and ice cream bought for me on a hot summer day out. I even received a Christmas card a whole year after I had departed. I also witnessed these acts of kindness among and between community members: a child's toy rescued from the rain, a new handle on a favourite garden tool, an ironed shirt for a much-needed job interview. These are small acts in themselves, but ones that create the bonds and bridges that bind a community together.

Over the years I have learned as much about myself as I have other people. Indeed, one community member I interviewed described living in community as “the most intense personal development programme you will ever experience.”

I am aware from experience that communities are generous hosts and many maintain open doors, often at the cost of their own privacy and time.

I also experienced loneliness. As a researcher one's identity is never fully forgotten, and so I also observed people holding back, adapting their versions of events, and (very occasionally) avoiding my company entirely. It is to be expected. I am aware that as well as being a guest, I am also an invader of spaces, a witness to sometimes private goings-on, and an asker of (not always welcome) questions. It is my role to ask for people's interpretations of their own worlds, but my researcher role shifts these questions from innocent and passing inquiry to possible record-making of previously private thoughts and feelings.

To be “in community” is often to remove a layer of privacy from our lives, like removing the fences between a row of gardens. For the uninitiated, this can be challenging. At its most intense I felt myself to be in a state of self-surveillance and monitoring under the panopticon of community—rarely alone, shared meals, shared work, shared leisure. Experienced community members seemed to have mastered the art of managing this and appeared to relax absorbed in a book or newspaper whilst community unfolded around them. Perhaps this is a skill that can be learned.

Allowing researchers into one's community is an act of generosity. In my case nearly 40 adults needed to agree to my coming and spending significant time amongst them. Opening doors to researchers is a risk and it involves an act of trust that the researcher will be fair and balanced in their writing. It is a risk that intentional communities take surprisingly often, and one that (hopefully) benefits everyone, even if the findings are sometimes uncomfortable.

## Why are intentional communities of interest to researchers?

For researchers, intentional communities often provide distinct environments where ideas are being tested in real time, be this modern interpretations of family living, different forms of decision-making, or innovative forms of land-sharing or building. Worldwide various communities are testing out income-



*The author's children at an off-grid community in France, 2013.*

Photos courtesy of Kirsten Stevens-Wood



sharing, polyamory, off-grid living, subsistence farming, zero-carbon lifestyles, different forms of spirituality...the list goes on. Studies of these communities potentially create a knowledge loop where researchers collect data (often by visiting or living within their communities), which they then make sense of and feed into the knowledge machine.

Well-written, good-quality research can provide legitimacy to new ideas (not that communities are always looking for this), which can in turn feed into legal and policy development. For example the creation and evolution of the One Planet Development policy in Wales was underpinned by living examples of low-impact development, activism, and research.

Christiana, an intentional community in the Danish capital city of Copenhagen, runs its own researcher-in-residence programme with the aim of involving “artists, researchers and academics in an open, critical and reflective dialog around the free town Christiania, and to feed new creative and critical thinking back to the community and into the public realm globally.” Professor Helen Jarvis, herself a participant of the residency, described the relationship as highly reciprocal and a way for Christiania to access independent and rigorous research.

Some communities choose to invite researchers in as a conscious process of legitimatisation. Sometimes this relationship can then flow out and influence mainstream society. Examples include the development of community land trusts as a way of making land and housing available to groups who might otherwise not be able to afford it; the showcasing of alternative building methods such as strawbale and Passivhaus design; and more social models such as cohousing for elders. Communities are more likely to be places where ideas such as consensus decision-making or cooperative working practices take place. More recently there has been interest in the ways that communities have responded to and coped with the COVID-19 pandemic. The documentation of these experiments and innovations both within and without academic research allows a level of discussion, scrutiny, and sharing.

On a more personal note, communities are also fun to research and give me an opportunity to dip a toe into a lifestyle that I often yearn for. My experience of communities is that alternative ideas such as permaculture are given a toehold and allowed to flourish. I have seen people making a living from weaving and beekeeping; singing, yoga, and bell-ringing groups develop in the spaces created within communal living. From the outside, intentional communities do seem to make a whole which is *more* than the sum of the parts.

Having said that, I have also found that “community” can be exhausting.

## Where does all this research go?

Something I hear on a regular basis from many of the communities I visit is that they never hear back from the researcher once the visit is over and the data has been collected. Unfortunately, it is the nature of publishing (and the pressures of working in academia) that many articles will never make it out into the real world. The reasons for this are many but include workloads, funding, and time scarcity.

Most universities are very keen for research to be published in certain types of formats and journals, which often place the work of the researcher both at a distance to their community of research and (sadly) behind a paywall. Fortunately, this seems to be shifting and it is becoming more acceptable for work to be published on a more open-access basis. I also know that many academics will be very happy to share a copy of their work on request.

Unfortunately, the academic publishing process can be brutal and complex. Journals often have highly prescriptive house styles and challenging peer review processes which can be disheartening and time-consuming, particularly to the uninitiated.

Facing these and other obstacles, some researchers may “disappear” simply because the writing never gets done. Many research projects get left behind or subsumed in the pressure of other work. Some projects take years to complete and others sit in the back files waiting for a gap in the workload. This is sad both for the researcher who will have invested time and effort into their work, and also for the community who are often left wondering what it was all about.

On a brighter note, a vast amount of research *does* get completed and published, from PhDs’ academic books and articles, to less formal work such as blogs, magazines, and more recently open-access web-based publishing. The breadth of the work is breath-taking and can be found across almost all disciplines. Just in this last year I have read research drawn from communities about food waste, car miles, self-build, self-sufficiency, group dynamics, degrowth and alternative economics, globalisation, utopianism, equality, and disaffection. I found some to learn from, some to enjoy, and some to take with a pinch of salt.

So did I make the jump myself to join an intentional community? No, not yet, but I am looking into it. 🐦

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Chris Roth

# Creating the Ideal Community

By Sahmat

## The Sense of Community

It is the thesis of this article that there is an “Ideal Blueprint” for an intentional community. Many may resist this possibility. There are indeed many different types of intentional community: some spiritually-based, some secular; some highly communal, some not; some deliberately diverse, some not; etc. This suggests to some that there may be many different “Ideal Blueprints,” depending on your criteria. Certainly one’s criterion of “ideality” is the key to whether it makes sense to talk about an “ideal community.”

With this in mind, I am going to propose a particular ideality criterion, based on a lifetime (77 years and counting) of living in and studying intentional communities.

I was born in an intentional community, lived in a number of them as a child, and have lived in many more as an adult, for a total of 15 different intentional communities. I was involved in starting three of the communities in which I’ve lived as an adult.

I first got the idea that there might be an ideal type of intentional community from my father. He and my mother spent years living in and visiting many different communities in a search for the one that would be best for our family. They finally settled down in one that my father thought would be best for raising kids and demonstrating a peaceful pattern of life for the world. In 1948 my father was one of the founders of the Fellowship of Intentional Communities, formed through cooperation among a number of intentional communities. My father’s vision was that if communities cooperated with each other and helped each other improve, they could better bring up kids well and help produce a more peaceful world. The Fellowship of Intentional Communities has morphed in several stages into today’s Foundation for Intentional Community, which has produced the ic.org website and the *Communities Directory*, and also published *COMMUNITIES* for more than 25 years.

Some of the communities I’ve lived in were spiritually oriented, some secular. Some were highly communal with shared living units, some had separate housing units. Some were highly cooperative economically, some had no cooperative economics. But the key difference among all of these communities was that some valued highly the “Sense of Community” and some did not. The community that valued the Sense of Community the most was the one in which I spent the greater part of my childhood. Through that experience I learned that the potential for nourishing the Sense of Community in the community and the world was the greatest value of intentional communities.

But what do I mean by “Sense of Community” (SOC)? Most people have experienced what I would call the “ordinary SOC.” It’s the sense of shared purpose and connection that characterizes the group experience in some families, sports teams, groups with a social change mission, some religious groups, local and national groups dealing with a natural catastrophe or wartime situation, and some intentional communities. I believe that what caused my parents to settle our family in the main community of my childhood was precisely that they sensed a strong Sense of Community in this community.<sup>1</sup>

I’ll give one example of how the SOC manifested in the main community of my

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Why is a strong Sense of Community important in an intentional community? First of all, because when it exists people are drawn to it and are really happy being there. And secondly, it makes it much easier to work together harmoniously in community work.

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childhood. There was an understanding among all the adults that everyone shared some responsibility for the upbringing of all the children. In other words there was a strong shared sense that we were all members of one extended family. So I was parented in various ways by many of the adults other than my biological parents, especially during my junior high and high school years, when I was forming my adult personality. Here are some of the ways in which that happened:

Bill introduced me to classical music, especially Beethoven; later in life Beethoven's Ninth Symphony became very important to me. His wife Simone, who was Swiss French, saw I was interested in languages, so she started to teach me French; this later led to my spending my junior year studying in France, which became a second home to me. Carol had been a drama major in college and wrote a play for the community, convincing me to play the lead role; this led to my later acting in a number of different amateur productions. Euell had written a book on wild foods and took me and my sister on walks through the woods and fields, teaching us how to find wild foods; this cemented a connection with Nature that has been central in my life. Euell's wife Frieda was into esoteric things and introduced me to the idea of reincarnation, which later became a core belief of my life. Ray introduced me to the peace movement and the civil rights movement, leading to years of participating in freedom rides and ban-the-bomb demonstrations.

Now my biological parents weren't into any of these things that these other "co-parents" introduced me to. So if I'd only had parenting from my biological parents (like most kids today), I wouldn't have developed as rich a personality and as rich a life. When I left the community and went off to college, I soon found that my college friends did not have nearly as strong a sense of self as I did. When I meditated on why that was the case, it came to me that it was precisely because I had been given a rich and firm sense of self by a whole community of co-parents. All of this illustrates that it is especially important for kids to grow up in a community with a strong Sense of Community, including ideally a pattern of co-parenting. The African saying "It takes a village (a community) to raise a child" is definitely true. That most kids today grow up without such an essential community of co-parents is a tragedy and results in a high incidence of depression, loneliness, anxiety, and suicide.

Why is a strong Sense of Community important in an intentional community? First of all, because when it exists people are drawn to it and are really happy being there. And secondly, it makes it much easier to work together harmoniously in community work.

On the other side, if there is not a strong Sense of Community in a community, people don't necessarily want to be there long-term and people don't always work together harmoniously. Some years ago I lived for quite a while in a community that was highly communal, which you would think would help facilitate a strong Sense of Community. But this was not the case in that community, I think because SOC

was not one of the primary community values. In my first six-week visit to that community, there was a woman visiting from Germany with whom I became friendly. After her first week there, she told me she was going back to Germany because people here were "not friendly" and this community did not have the sense of connection and unity she was looking for. She said that the small village in Germany that she grew up in had a stronger Sense of Community. When I thought about it, I realized that she was right: People in this community did not have a strong sense of the reality and value of the community as a whole. They were there primarily for their own separate individual reasons and interacted primarily with a small group of close friends, rather than with the community as a whole.

Over the years this particular highly communal community has had a high turnover rate approaching 25 percent a year. Based on people I've talked to who have left, one reason they left was that the Sense of Community was not strong enough for them. And this same community has had a major conflict over one of the community businesses, which I believe developed precisely because there was not a strong enough sense of unity in the community.

If you compare the main community of my childhood with this other community I've just mentioned, I believe that the main reason the one developed a strong Sense of Community and the other did not was that the one I grew up with had a strong common intention to maintain a Sense of Community and the one I lived in more recently did not. As Thoreau said, "Men hit only what they aim at." In other words, to maintain a strong Sense of Community in a group the first requirement is a strong common intention to maintain that as a primary value, if not THE primary value. Only two of the 15 communities I've lived in had maintaining a Sense of Community as a primary conscious value. And they were the only ones who were actually able to reach that goal for a time. So the ideal "intentional" community shares the "ideal primary intention" of maintaining a deep Sense of Community.

## Peck's Community Building Workshop

My understanding of what "Sense of Community" was really about was enhanced when, beginning in 1990, I experienced the "Community Building" workshops developed by Dr. M. Scott Peck. After many different group experiences Peck realized that maintaining a strong Sense of Community in a group depended on the group engaging in relational practices that encouraged them to relate to each other according to what he called the "Laws of Community." This term came from Peck's realization that "this is a Lawful Universe" on all levels. It's obvious that there are material-level objective universal laws in the sciences of Biology, Physics, and Computers, in all of which sciences I had been trained. It's then perfectly reasonable that there should be objective laws or principles in the realm of human relations.

The First Law of Community I've already referred to: The Law of Sense of Community as the Top Priority. The Second Law for Peck was the Law of Equal All-Sharing. This Law dictates that to maintain a strong SOC there has to be many types of equal intimate sharing among community members, both materially and especially spiritually.

Based on these laws or principles of relating (and eight others less important for current purposes), Peck designed a group practice that if practiced by a small group for two or three days would greatly facilitate the development of a strong Sense of Community in the group. The weekend workshop he designed to embody this practice he called a "Community Building Workshop." The way the process works is that a group of say 15 to 50 sit in a circle together for 12 to 18 hours total and take turns sharing with the group anything they "feel moved" to share. This process is facilitated by a trained facilitator who makes sure that the group observes the two main Laws of Community and several other principles in their sharings.

Magically, it turns out that often such a group is able to share an unusually strong Sense of Community by the end of the workshop. Sometimes the shared sense of peace, love, and joy that develops in the group is so strong that—in Peck's

words—the group "falls in love with each other" spiritually. Peck called this special state of a deep Sense of Community "True Community." I call it "Beloved Community" because it is primarily characterized by this "falling in love" spiritually with the group as a whole. (The term "Beloved Community" was coined by Josiah Royce and promoted by Martin Luther King Jr.)

I attended my first Peck-style Community Building Workshop in Knoxville in 1990. By the third day, this group all of a sudden entered this special group consciousness state of Beloved Community. Within a few seconds the atmosphere of the group changed dramatically and we suddenly found ourselves sharing a deep sense of peace, love, and joy. At this point, I had a profound experience: As I looked into the eyes of each person in the circle in turn, I had the sense that I was seeing into an interior room that went on and on forever, and that each interior individual self I was seeing was uniquely precious and sacred. At the same time, I also had the sense that each of these interior rooms came together in their depths as a single room, a single "Sacred Unity." So this was an experience of the harmonious unity of the Sacred Individuality of each and the Sacred Unity of all, a deep experience of what might be called the "Community Self" of the whole group.

At the same time, I felt (and it seemed that others in the circle also felt) a deep sense of peace, love, and joy that were somehow inherent in this "Sacred I/We-ness" or Community Selfhood that was revealing him/herself in the circle. It felt like I had "fallen in love" spiritually with each Sacred Individual in the group, as well as with the Sacred Unity of all of us.

I recognized that because of this deep "love element," this was a deeper Sense of Community than I had ever experienced before: The difference between the more ordinary Sense of Community I'd experienced in the community I grew up in and in other groups and this experience was something like the difference between merely liking the members of a group and "falling in love" with them. Most of us have experienced this difference between "liking" and "loving" in one-to-one relationships, and when you move from liking to loving you cross a definite line into a much deeper experience. What I was discovering was that the same thing applies to one's relationship to a group:

### Our Community Self and the Identity-Shift

Every local group of any size has a Community Self. There are also regional and national Community Selves, and ultimately a Global Community Self encompassing all the life on Earth. We usually don't notice the Community Self on any level because our consciousness is usually focused on the material level, and the Community Self (being a spiritual entity) is invisible to our material senses. What's most apparent to our material senses is our apparently separate material bodies, which makes us think that each of us has a separate self separate from all other selves. The best ordinary evidence for the existence of our Community Self is the global atmosphere ("Global Community Breath Ocean") that we share with all life: What I breathe out is ultimately breathed in by other life forms all over the planet, and what they all breathe out is ultimately breathed in by me. In a very real sense we are our breath (since we become alive only with the first breath and leave the body only after the last breath). So the fact that we share the Global Breath Ocean with all Earth life shows concretely that we are all aspects of the one Global Community Self.

The current global Covid pandemic illustrates the reality of the Global Breath Ocean we all share and the Global Community Self it represents. I get the virus in the US because of what someone in China earlier breathed out, and what I breathe out is ultimately breathed in by others all over the world. There's no way of isolating ourselves from this shared Global Breath Ocean, just as there's no way of isolating our individual selves from the Global Community Self that both encompasses each of them and enhances each of them.

It turns out that the way to make the shift from our ordinary state of separative consciousness into the group consciousness state of the Community-love/joy of Beloved Community is to make an Identity-Shift from our ordinary state of self-identifying with the separate self to a group consciousness state of identifying our self as the Community Self (which includes all of our unique non-separate individual selves). The reason that community Relational Practices designed according to the Laws of Beloved Community (the Laws of Community Selfhood) promote Beloved Community is that they facilitate this Identity-Shift into local and global Community Selfhood.

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## The Beloved Tribe Blueprint

The following list of Relational Practices together specify the nature of a Beloved Tribe. They are all designed according to the Laws of Beloved Community, especially the Law of Beloved Community Top Priority and the Law of Equal All-Sharing. (The other Laws used in this design are the Laws of Spirit-Guidance, All-inclusion, Individual Honoring, Mindfulness, Ego-emptying, Honesty and Integrity, Dialectical Evolution, and Serious Fun.) A community that shares this set of Law-based Relational Practices has an excellent chance of sharing the Love and Joy of the Beloved Community state on an ongoing basis. These group practices break down into two broad categories:

### 1. Institutional Relational Practices

These practices are designed to meet all basic material needs of community members in a pro-community way and should completely replace the current anti-community institutions of the wider society. These practices are particularly based on the Law of Equal All-Sharing. They are pro-community (unifying and sustainable), as opposed to the existing societal institutions they will replace that are anti-community (separating and unsustainable).

**Shared Vision and Mission Statement:** The Vision is to maintain a deep state of Beloved Community, locally and globally. The Mission is to do this by sharing Relational Practices designed according to the Laws of Beloved Community.

**Spirit of Community Connection:** This practice is designed to open the community to continuous guidance from the Spirit of Community behind this Universe that is constituted by communities on all levels (communities of galaxies, stars, planets, species, individual organisms, organs, cells, molecules, atoms, electrons and quarks, etc.), all governed by the material level Laws of Community in the form of the Laws of Physics and Biology.

**Shared Housing:** This makes possible pro-community relations with others throughout the day.

**Shared Community Businesses:** This makes it possible for the Beloved Tribe to be economically self-sufficient on a gift-sharing (vs. monetary) basis, so that members do not have to take outside jobs that take them away from the community.

**Shared Resources and Income:** All resources and income are equally shared among all members.

**Shared Child-rearing and Education:** Children are co-parented by all adult members. A Community School teaches primarily pro-community Relational

Practices, both to children of the community and children from the outside.

**Community Garden:** The Community Garden produces most of the food for the community, and also helps in maintaining a close Nature Connection.

**Pro-community Alternative Technology:** Technology that is pro-community (unifying and sustainable) versus most modern anti-community (separating and unsustainable) technologies.

**Consensus Decision-making:** Guided by the Spirit of Community, this pro-community decision-making process makes all local decisions unanimously and replaces the function of local government in the wider society.

**Consensus-enhancing Conflict Resolution:** Conflict is inevitable, but the proper process can resolve conflicts in a way that enhances consensus and Beloved Community.

**Global Connection Practice:** This practice maintains cooperative connections with other communities locally, regionally, nationally, and globally, promoting a state of Global Beloved Community.

**Law-based Evaluation and Design of Relational Practices** (including existing societal institutions).

**Phased Membership:** As in many existing communities, creating the proper match between prospective members and the community has to proceed in phases that take many months: Guest, Visitor, Provisional Member, and Full Member.

### 2. Spiritual Relational Practices

These practices are not focused on meeting material level needs but rather on enhancing the Spirit-to-Spirit connections of community members with each other and with Nature.

**Open Circle Sharing:** The "Community Building" practice developed by M. Scott Peck.

**Community Breathwork:** Facilitates Beloved Community by focusing on how all Earth Life shares the same Global Community Breath (global atmosphere).

**Nature Connection Practice:** Facilitates community connection with other species and the Earth. Ideally the community is situated in the country, which makes such practice easier.

**Community Principles Study:** Group study of the Four Global Truths and the Laws of Beloved Community.

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moving from merely liking to truly loving crosses a line into a radically deeper Sense of Community that Peck called “True Community” (and that I’m calling “Beloved Community”). Consistent with this terminology I call Peck’s “Laws of Community” “Laws of Beloved Community.”

This special experience of shared love and joy that is inherent in the Beloved Community experience I call “Community-love/joy.” This is a deeper and potentially more lasting shared experience of love and joy than that sometimes shared by two or a few individuals outside of the Beloved Community experience. It is inherent in Who We Are as a united human family (our Global Community Self) and is the experience we’re meant to be sharing all the time. (See sidebar, “Our Community Self and the Identity-Shift.”)

## The Beloved Tribe Blueprint (Ideal Community Blueprint)

After this experience of Beloved Community in the Peck-style workshop, I realized that the ideal type of intentional community had the potential for facilitating this special Beloved Community state on an ongoing basis, and not just for a weekend. What was obviously required for a community to share Ongoing Beloved Community (and thus be ideal) was to design all of the relational practices of the community according to the Laws of Beloved Community that Peck had discovered. This should enable the whole community to share sustainably the Community-love/joy inherent in the Beloved Community state of group consciousness.

A community designed according to the Laws of Beloved Community I call a “Beloved Community Tribe” (“Beloved Tribe” for short). The “tribe” term is meant to evoke the small indigenous tribes close to Nature that humans lived in for 99 percent of our three million year history. This small tribe pattern is in fact the only social organization that has ever met all human material and spiritual

## The Ideal Community Workshop

I have designed a three-day workshop that introduces participants to the details of each of the group Relational Practices necessary for creating the Ideal Community (Beloved Community Tribe) that would maintain the Beloved Community state of group consciousness. (These are the Relational Practices described in the second sidebar.) I call this workshop “Creating the Ideal Community.” I have offered this workshop in several different forms over the years. I believe that the current version is close to the ideal form.

This workshop will be useful both to those interested in starting an intentional community and to those interested in transforming an existing community (or sub-community) into a group that more strongly facilitates the shared Beloved Community experience. It will be particularly helpful to those looking to start an intentional community. Startup groups often make the mistake of trying to acquire land and buildings too early in the process. In Phase One, the most important thing is to start to establish the type of deep relationships among community members that can result in the shared Beloved Community experience. The workshop will teach you how to engineer this Phase One community-starting process immediately, without waiting for the acquisition of community land and buildings.

This workshop is offered as a free gift to all, and I can deliver it to any group anywhere in the world. Immediately following this article you will find an ad describing the workshop. If you are interested in being kept informed about when and where these workshops will be offered, send an email with the subject line “workshop” to: [idealcommunityworkshop@gmail.com](mailto:idealcommunityworkshop@gmail.com).

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needs and kept its members healthy and happy. The Beloved Tribe is thus a modern version of this highly successful traditional form of human social organization.

I have designed the Law-based relational practices of such an ideal community, and I call the complete set of such practices the “Beloved Tribe Blueprint.” This is the “Ideal Community Blueprint” I referred to at the beginning of this article. (See sidebar, “The Beloved Tribe Blueprint.”)

The Community-love/joy of Beloved Community is valuable not only for those individuals who share it in a particular Beloved Tribe, but it is essential for Humanity as a whole. M. Scott Peck once stated that “In and through community [Beloved Community] lies the salvation of the world.” So what is it that the world needs to be “saved” from? I’ve mentioned that one of my community co-parents got me involved in the civil rights and peace movements. This sensitized me to the fact that the sufferings caused by racism and wars are endemic all over the world. But there are several other types of suffering that are also widespread all over the world. In fact, there are what I call the “Big Six” of “Catastrophic Global Sufferings”: Racism, Wars, Child Abuse, Abuse of Women, Poverty, and Nature Abuse. Each of these major categories of suffering affects half or more of the world directly or indirectly. When you add up all this suffering it is truly catastrophic.

I have designed a workshop that introduces participants to the Law-based Relational Practices necessary for creating and maintaining the Ideal Community (Beloved Community Tribe). I am offering this workshop as a free gift to all. (See sidebar, “The Ideal Community Workshop.”) I hope you will be interested in attending it and will contact me at the email address listed! See also the ad for this workshop following this article. 🌸

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*Sahmat has lived in 15 different communities throughout his life, started three of them, and has visited and studied many more. He was originally trained as an ecologist, but has also been trained in computer science and quantum physics. He has taught all of these subjects. His training in the law-based sciences has spurred him to make a law-based science out of Community Building. He is the author of the book Saving the World Through Community.*

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1. My father probably preferred the term “Sense of Fellowship” as an equivalent to “Sense of Community,” which is probably why he liked the term “fellowship” when helping name of the Fellowship of Intentional Communities. He also might have been thinking of the peace movement organization “The Fellowship of Reconciliation” (FOR) in choosing this term. Interestingly, the FOR was founded by the 19th Century American philosopher Josiah Royce, who also coined the term “Beloved Community.” I believe that Royce chose this term “fellowship” because it is prominent in the Christian New Testament (as a translation of the New Testament Greek term *koinonia*, which means something like “common consciousness” or “spiritual unity”). The New Testament describes in many passages how the early disciples shared a strong sense of fellowship with Jesus and with each other, and that this experience of spiritual unity with each other was central to what early Christianity was all about. It’s clear that “Fellowship” in this sense and “Beloved Community” refer to essentially the same state of group consciousness.





# CREATING THE IDEAL COMMUNITY: A WORKSHOP

**INTRODUCTION:** If you read the article immediately preceding this ad (highly recommended), you will find that there is such a thing as the "Ideal Intentional Community". Briefly, the ideal community is one in which the members maintain a strong Sense of Community among themselves. When a community shares a deep Sense of Community, people really want to be there and they work together cooperatively most effectively. It turns out that maintaining a deep Sense of Community is not easily done, and that most communities do not do a very good job in this respect.

**ARE YOU INTERESTED** in joining an intentional community that approaches this ideal? Then this workshop is **FOR YOU!**

**OR WOULD YOU LIKE TO IMPROVE** your existing community? Then this workshop is **FOR YOU!** **OR WOULD YOU JUST LIKE TO LEARN** the community-building skills to create a deeper Sense of Community in groups you're involved with?

Then this workshop is **ALSO FOR YOU!**

**THE BACKGROUND:** A study of many different communities over many years has revealed that the greatest potential of intentional communities is that members can learn to maintain a deep Sense of Community with each other, and then help to spread the Sense of Community in the world. In fact, a lack of the Sense of Community globally is the source of the rampant conflict and competition that creates most of the world's suffering: Racism, Wars, Abuse of Children, Abuse of Women, Poverty, Abuse of Nature, etc. To help spread a Sense of Community in the world by demonstrating how to cooperate to maintain a deep Sense of Community will be to help "save the world" from all this unnecessary suffering.

**THE WORKSHOP:** This workshop will teach you how to design the various types of Relational Practices that facilitate a deep Sense of Community. These include Spirit Connection, Shared Housing, Shared Economics, Shared Parenting and Childhood Education, Consensus Decision-making, Conflict Resolution, etc. (These and other essential Relational Practices are detailed in the preceding article.) In learning how to design and implement these essential community practices, you will learn important community-building skills, including Deep Listening, Sharing from the Heart, Group Meditation, Reaching Consensus, Pro-community Technology Design, etc. If you read the article preceding this ad, you will find a more complete and detailed list of these community practices that promote a strong Sense of Community.

**DETAILS:** The workshop extends for 3 1/2 days, usually Thursday evening through Sunday afternoon. In order to make it maximally covid-safe, participants will camp out together in a campground especially prepared for the workshop. If and when the pandemic ends the workshop will be offered in indoor mode in a conference center. This workshop can be offered to any group anywhere. It is also possible for you to be part of an online half-day intro to the full workshop.

If you are interested in being part of an Ideal Community workshop or on online intro, SEND AN EMAIL with subject line "workshop" to [idealcommunityworkshop@gmail.com](mailto:idealcommunityworkshop@gmail.com) You can also call Sahmat at 434-305-4770

*Sahmat is the primary designer and facilitator of this workshop. He has lived in 15 different communities throughout his life, started 3 of them, and has visited and studied many more. He was originally trained as an ecologist, but has also been trained in computer science and quantum physics. He has taught all of these subjects. His training in the law-based sciences has spurred him to make a law-based science out of Community Building. He is the author of the book **Saving the World Through Community**. In addition to offering the Ideal Community Workshops, Sahmat is available to consult with existing or forming communities on developing ideal community policies and processes, especially in the areas of Vision/Mission Creation, Consensus, and Conflict Resolution.*



# Collaborative Happiness:

## Building the Good Life in Urban Cohousing Communities

By *Catherine Kingfisher*

Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford, 2022, 254 pages.

**Editor's Note:** We invited several reviewers to send us their assessments of this new book. Below, we present edited excerpts from two reviews we received of what Dr. Evelyn LaTorre (Mission Peak Village, Fremont, California), in a shorter note, called "a thorough study of how quality, environmentally sound, and satisfying lives have been achieved in two intentional communities of two distinct cultures...an exceptionally inspiring and well-documented book."

### Denise Tennen writes:

**C**ollaborative Happiness makes the case that living in a cohousing community contributes to your happiness.

I approached this book as a cohousing veteran of 26 years. My husband and I raised our blended family of three children at Monterey Cohousing Community in Minnesota. Now empty-nesters, we continue to be active members, sharing our home with a close friend. I was curious to discover whether Catherine Kingfisher's research would match my experience.

I found the lengthy introduction dry but useful. It is an academic overview of happiness as it relates to housing choices in society today, and concludes that most options foster isolation and loneliness. Paradoxically, the search for individual happiness, with greater and greater focus on the self, often ends up isolating people. Kingfisher posits that our social connectedness is the fundamental foundation for happiness. Her case studies focus on cohousing, an option that fosters connection amongst its residents by its design and governance structures.

Kingfisher hits her stride when she describes the two urban cohousing communities she spent time with over the course of six years: Kankanmori in the Nippori neighborhood of Tokyo in Japan and Quayside Village in Vancouver, Canada. She offers vivid portraits of the pluses and potential pitfalls of the cohousing life. The descriptions of Quayside Village and Kankanmori reveal profound cultural differences, such as loose work requirements vs. detailed participation rules and emotional expression in meetings vs. focus solely on the practical. What is common to both communities is revealed in Kingfisher's engaging stories of neighbors watching out for each other, enjoying meals and festive occasions together, as well as sharing in the day-to-day running of their communities (financial decisions, community meals, gardening, recycling, etc.).

In the last section of the book, members from each of the communities visit the other for a period of 10 days. The visitors make eye-opening discoveries. For example, though one community has strict work requirements and the other allows all work by self-selection, both are surprised to find that, for both communities, the work gets done and relationships are enhanced. They discover there is more than one way to reach an end result.

The book is geared toward introducing cohousing to policy-makers and individuals new to the concept, but it is also valuable for those of us who practice this lifestyle. I found myself reading passages to my neighbors and everyone wants to get the book. We hope a paperback

edition is planned, as it would be much easier to thumb through and bookmark than the ebook I was provided as a reviewer.

*Collaborative Happiness* provides succinct descriptions on how best to thrive in a cohousing context. Some sections are so powerful I've gotten permission from the author to use them in our materials for potential new members; for example, this quote from Peter Burch of Quayside Village: "When living in a cohousing community, what you gain in connection, friendship, and support you lose in control." (p. 63)

The book captures much of what cohousing adds to my personal happiness quotient. The day we moved to our cohousing home, a community meal awaited us. My child became best friends with the child a few houses down. Even at four and two years of age, it was safe for them to walk to each other's houses on their own; something I would never have allowed in our prior very safe but non-cohousing neighborhood. When my former partner died, my neighbors did all the calling to invite people to the celebration of his life and did all the set up and take down so I could be present with everyone while I cried and laughed and grieved.

My community is going through growing pains—not because our size is changing, but because founder households are now outnumbered four to one. I read *Collaborative Happiness* through the lens of witnessing and wondering how accelerating changes in leadership might affect our future as a cohousing community as well as my own happiness.

We recently took two days to reflect and share about the difficulties we have in integrating new members. I was surprised and moved to hear the ways newcomers felt like their opinions weren't taken seriously. It was a wake-up call and I'm gratified that we are now coming together to create what we're calling a community reset. Around here the next generation of parents are revisioning a space currently filled with junk to be a maker space for our teens. An underutilized front lawn has been fenced to be a safe place for our many community dogs to play. There were some tough negotiations over quiet time and just exactly how big the fenced area should be. In the end all that work created deeper connections among us.

Reading the stories of connection, col-



laboration, and yes, conflict in *Collaborative Happiness*, reminds me: it's not a slam-dunk (move to cohousing and you will be happier), but if enough of us put in the effort to listen to each other and collaborate within our cohousing communities, the difficulties we experience are far outweighed by the joys of a more socially connected life.

### Sharon Villines writes:

Professor Emerita of Anthropology at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada, Catherine Kingfisher spent six years on this study of two urban cohousing communities, living in each community for short periods of time to observe and conduct interviews. She has also posted an extensive number of short films from each community online.

It is tempting to say that she simply observed and asked questions but since she is a cultural anthropologist her questions were not so simple. They focused on understanding how and why the two community cultures contrasted so greatly in their beliefs and behaviors, social, economic, and work systems, demographics and household compositions, and social hierarchies. The result is a perceptive and detailed comparison of how two decades-old communities that are so different continue to produce the same result: happy, thriving groups of residents who live, play, and work together successfully.

Because the study lasted for such a long time, both communities were obviously affected by the questions asked. I think few cohousing communities could explain with such clarity and insight exactly how and why they do what they do unless given time to consider the questions and discuss them, testing each other's memories and beliefs. The culmination of the study was a visit by a selection of residents from each community to the other and a discussion of the changes that resulted from these visits.

The impetus for both communities was similar to those of other cohousing communities. The Quayside Village founding members aspired to have "a community which is diverse in age, background and family type, that offers a safe, friendly living environment which is affordable, accessible, and environmentally conscious. The emphasis is on quality of life including the nurture of children, youth, and elders."

Kankanmori's founders also emphasized trust, communication, camaraderie, and engagement with the wider community. Both communities purchase supplies for the common meals and organize group purchases from the local coops or farmer. They compost, and grow vegetables and flowers. The extent of various economic and environmentally sustainable practices balances the practical with the responsible. When a resident can support a complex process of composting and recycling, for example, it is implemented, but if that resident leaves, it may not be possible to continue it.

There are stark differences between the two communities, however, raising the question: How they can both be typical cohousing communities and be so different?

### Kankanmori

At Kankanmori, there are precise rules for anything that is categorized as business: accounting, the distribution of tasks, and use of the laundry and guest rooms. Kankanmori also has an internal currency so costs can be easily be tracked and shared—the currency is signed and labelled when used similar to a check. Concern for fairness is paramount but tends to be equated with sameness. Everyone is expected to contribute an equal amount of time. Each person cooks once a month. Each person serves on two committees. And there is a committee for everything—24 carefully defined and assigned committees. Each meal is prepared following the same procedure. Meals are paid for at the beginning of the meal and the expenses and income for the meal are carefully recorded and reported by a set time following the meal. There are defined roles so all the tasks are known by everyone and automatically performed.

Kingfisher notes that in Japan, adapting to social norms is appreciated because they believe that it guarantees social harmony and avoids conflict.

"The running of the community is in this sense collaboratively depersonalized: the focus is not on individual personalities but on institutionalized processes that lie outside of any one person's whims or desires. This serves to reduce the possibility of arguments about people monopolizing the guest room, leaving their clothes lying around the laundry room,

or not doing anything to contribute to the running of the community, since such behaviors are unlikely to occur in the first place." (p. 189)

Precision is also a cultural Japanese value. If it can be done, it can be done precisely. Kankanmori residents expect to be told how things are done, not in the sense of commands, but in the sense of being informed.

### Quayside Village

At Quayside Village, we come to the Western hemisphere—the other side of the world. At Quayside, there are no written instructions or requirements. The common value is that each person contributes as they are able, and the benefit of contribution is belongingness—the development of community ties. "Each-according-to-their-strengths, each-according-to-their-desires." (p. 85) They have only four committees: Thriving Committee, responsible for maintaining a nurturing environment in which people are thriving; Maintenance Committee, responsible for the buildings and grounds; the Finance Committee; and the Garden Committee. Smaller groups may focus on a particular event or facility, like composting, but they don't have separate budget lines and generally not designated leaders. Great value is placed on spontaneous participation and organization. It is recognized that residents' lives change so they may be more involved in certain years or seasons. Or they may be very active on a committee but rarely attend meetings.

A meal is planned when a cook puts up a notice of a meal with the menu. Interested residents sign up. The cook is not responsible for cleanup; the residents put their own dishes into the dishwasher. Others box up leftovers, wash pots and pans, and start the laundry.

There is no charge for using the clothes washer and dryer. They found it too much trouble so now assume that "it all comes out in the wash." If a laundry load is done, someone will move it to a basket in order to use the machine. There are frequently baskets of laundry and racks of drying clothes sitting around the room.

Residents at Quayside value the guaranteed proximity, safety, and opportunities for enjoyment, care, and autonomy. The casual happening of things is relished because it allows freedom while at the same time the environment ensures that engagement will happen spontaneously.

## Rental vs. Ownership

One characteristic that may have a large influence on the culture at Kankanmori is that it is a rental community. This issue has been one of concern in the United States and elsewhere because it is feared that a cohousing community would be hard to form with transient residents. But three conditions make it work at Kankanmori. First, the community members are entirely in control of their community—there is no owner who places requirements on the community or vets new residents. Second, leases are three years long and there are few changeovers each year. And third, the Kankanmori's extensive orientation materials and the general Japanese expectation of clear procedures and rules makes it easy for new residents to quickly integrate into the community.

Kankanmori is a good example of making a community of rentals possible in the United States. In many countries even wealthy households rent for the duration of their lives.

## Children

Interestingly, the place of children in the community seems the reverse of the expectations of adults. In Kankanmori, children are free to run and play and make noise at will. While the Japanese culture values precision, order, and following common rules, the children are expected to “behave like children.” At Quayside, where the adults are given every opportunity to balance their contributions with their own proclivities and time restraints, there are clear expectations of children. They are not allowed to run in and out of meetings or make unnecessary noise. If other adults are bothered by a child's behavior they speak to the parents or caregivers and the child is corrected.

When the residents exchanged visits, this was a topic of great discussion. Kankanmori residents were most greatly surprised.

## Other Dimensions

There are many more aspects of this study to be reviewed—the treatment of public and private spaces, sharing of personal information, use of the common house, centrality of the individual vs. the community, and at Kankanmori, continuing relationships with residents who have moved away. What is different about “urban” cohousing is especially interesting.

Another aspect that I valued from reading this study: I recognized not only how different two communities could be while still being the same, but the existence of these same two dimensions in my own community. At Takoma Village some residents value the rules and having everything written down on paper (or rather on the members' website) and others want no rules and expect everything to be determined by what works in the moment. The first tends to say that we decided this so that's how it will be, and the second says, why? No rule can determine the best use of space or time in every instance. Exceptions can always be made.

Kingfisher examines the reasoning behind the rules vs. relaxed stances and some of the differences in the two communities that are the result of these two dimensions. Some are desirable, and others not so desirable. Both communities changed in some respects as the result of the study.

This is a very useful book for established as well as forming communities. It gives the most complete view of cohousing community life that I have seen. And it will allay many fears related to the question, “Can cohousing work for me?” It is published by an academic publisher, which means it is relatively expensive, with a \$135 hardcover list price. The Kindle edition can be found for \$17. Having one copy to share in your community would be very helpful in understanding cohousing and in understanding other cohousers. It could be a good choice for a nightly read-aloud and discussion group. 🐦

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*Denise Tennen is a long-time resident member of Monterey Cohousing Community in St. Louis Park, Minnesota. She is also a visual artist, musician, dancer, organic gardener, newsletter editor, and writer.*

*Sharon Villines is a founding member of Takoma Village Cohousing in Washington, DC and is coauthor with John Buck of We the People: Consenting to a Deeper Democracy, a handbook on understanding and implementing sociocratic principles and practices. She publishes most of her writing on [StrongNeighborhoods.info](http://StrongNeighborhoods.info), a website on forming strong communities, in or out of Cohousing.*



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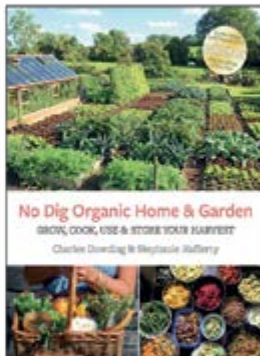
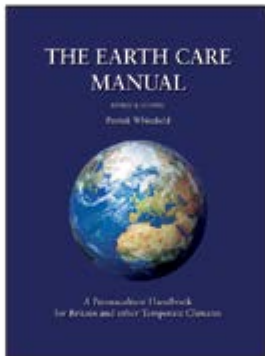
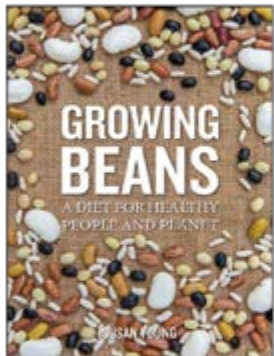
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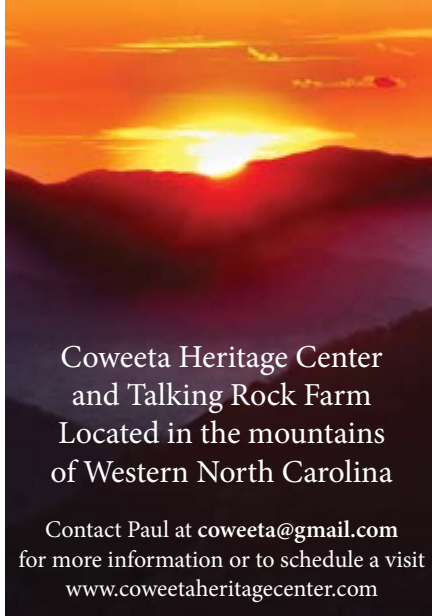
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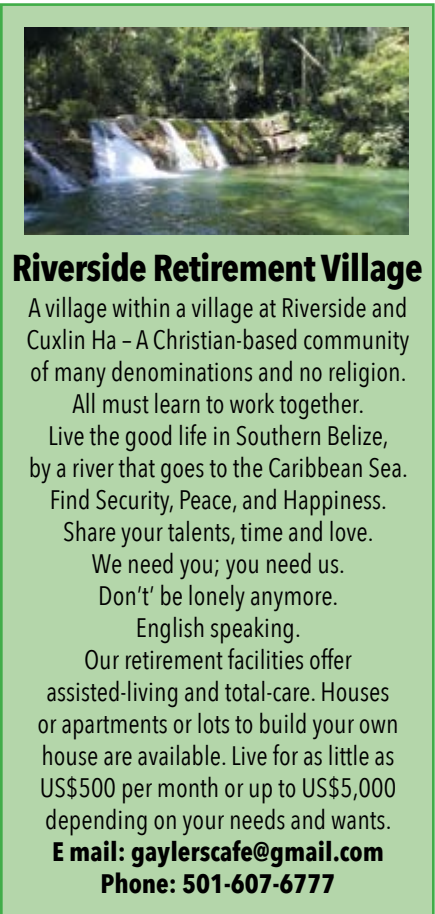


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# COMMUNITIES' Place on the Planet, Five Decades On



Chris Roth

In the first issue of COMMUNITIES I edited (#19, March 1976), I wrote: “COMMUNITIES derives from the experience of individuals trying to survive and grow humanely. We are living together communally, raising our kids cooperatively, building collective economic structures. To develop practical relationships with each other is hopeful, painful, demanding. To work out relationships with the rest of a society which often seems self-destructive and oppressive can be downright difficult.”

Almost half a century later, it seems we're struggling with the same issues. That's either depressing (have we learned nothing?) or cheering (we haven't given up the struggle).

In the summer of '77, I set out via a Greyhound Ameripass, on a two month journey across this continent.

Coming to each world like a curious space traveler  
Noting the customs, paying the dues  
With my community history  
Till folks have sniffed out my strangeness  
And pronounced me human

Then opening my peddler's pack  
Spreading out my awareness  
Of the projects and communities which challenge  
Preconceptions about our helplessness

*Would you like a yard or two of my pretty networking?  
Try our best snake-oil appropriate technology  
Take this magazine, and by your participation, make it ours?  
Could we co-create the future?*

What we were doing with COMMUNITIES contradicted the usual ethos of journalism. Rather, we were more about participants documenting what worked and what didn't; a journal of cooperative learning.

*Malon & Jennifer & Kat Kinkade  
The East Wind gang a frontier made  
Of cows and hammocks, shared power and toil  
Pioneer spirit and Missouri soil  
Folks working harder to make a fresh start  
Our guide is good structure, judgment our art*

It wasn't all fun and games. Community could have inherent contradictions which I explored in a 1979 editorial about a cult's mass suicide. “The People's Temple found its membership among the contradictions, confusion and poverty which exist in the midst of plenty: people who were conditioned to jive, hustle and dodge the failure they knew to be their inalienable right... The People's Temple offered a way out of hopelessness, costing only the freedom which was a glut on the market.”

At the end of its first decade, COMMUNITIES published *A Guide to Cooperative Alternatives: community participation, social change, well-being, appropriate technology, networking, and almost anything else hopeful in America*; 188 pages of the experience we were accruing. We sold 10,000 copies, and for the first time, felt like a stable operation—both in terms of living up to our highest ideals and being financially solvent enough to pay modest salaries. *The Washington Post* wrote: “As you take a trip through the '80s, consider this Guide as a valuable resource.”

When I launched a major venture, Co-op America, in 1982, the first edition of our consumer catalog was published as a 32 page insert in COMMUNITIES. I introduced it as follows: “COMMUNITIES has helped develop Co-op America as a founding member. From the early vision of a national cooperative marketing service, Co-op America is already serving almost 200 Organizational Members with economically useful and politically congruent services.”

I tend to stay attached to projects in which I've been deeply invested. I'm still writing regularly in COMMUNITIES, frequently about my primary community, Dance New England. Co-op America changed its name to Green America, and I remain on the Board as Founder and President Emeritus.

Community continues to be for me the best expression of our humanity, and this magazine an honorable and worthy testament. 🐦

---

*Paul Freundlich has been an active participant and creator in the development of cooperative, communitarian, and sustainable alternatives for 60 years. See [exemplars.world](http://exemplars.world) and past issues of COMMUNITIES for more of his writing.*

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We've decided we can no longer tolerate this economic drain nor this waste, so in this final newsstand issue, we are encouraging you who are our newsstand readers to subscribe instead! You will actually save money by subscribing, and we in turn will receive the full amount of your subscription payment (minus small transaction fees, depending on method), rather than less than half that amount of money. We will also eliminate the drain that has actually had us *paying*, overall, to be on newsstands, rather than even covering our costs.

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## New Mailing Envelopes

Subscribers will notice something new with this issue: it arrived in a mailing envelope. This is because dozens of copies of our Spring 2022 issue reached readers with battered and partially-separated covers, torn pages, and more. Some people received *only* their cover. New automatic sorting machines within USPS are the apparent culprits.

We ended up replacing a few dozen copies. Please let us know if you too need your copy of #194 replaced. In some cases, it may not have arrived at all.

From here on out, we will be mailing exclusively in envelopes, to protect the magazines better as they make the journey from printer to you.

This new mailing method comes at significant added expense: likely about \$1400 in additional costs over the next two years of mailings. Fortunately, a generous donor has already contributed \$500 to jump-start this initiative. We are hoping that others of you may also help us cover this extra unanticipated expense.

Actual production costs have also risen nearly 20 percent over the past six months, due to escalating paper prices. We do not want to raise basic subscription rates, because we want to keep the magazine accessible to as many people as possible. But if you can afford to subscribe at Supporter or Sustainer levels and/or to make additional donations, please know that it is helping us meet these expenses and keep the magazine in print, which is where the great majority of readers tell us they want it to be.

Thank you!

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