

**BODILY AUTONOMY AND PUBLIC HEALTH: COVID AT THE FARM**

# COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

Fall 2023 • Issue #200

\$10 US / \$13 Canada

## Adaptation

After the Nuclear Family  
Community Decarbonization  
Agroforestry and Social Forestry  
Conflict, Powerlessness, and Hope  
Tending the Land as People of Place



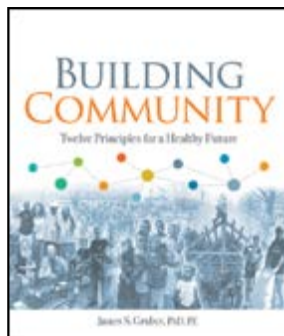
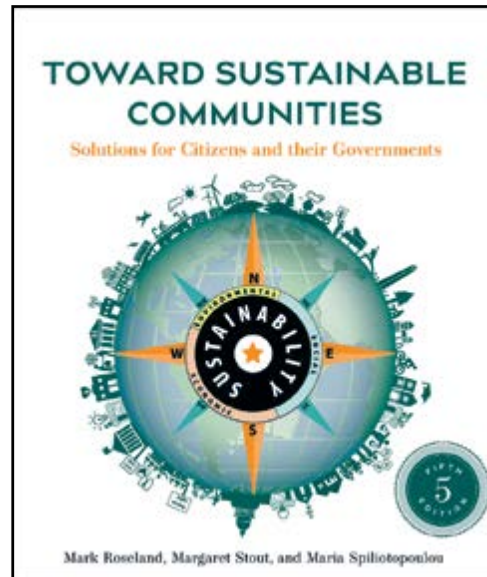
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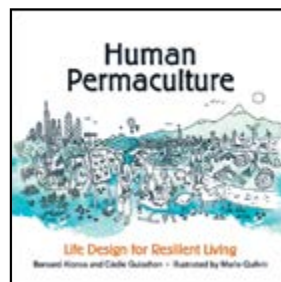
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**ON THE COVER**



Wildflowers grow at the edge of a constructed wetland off Morgan Street in Oberlin, Ohio. Until two years ago, this land was underwater, at the bottom of an old reservoir subsequently drained to create the wetlands. Photo by Chris Roth.



# COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

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## Letters



## Coping with Bullies

Oh my god, Diana Leafe Christian's article series, "Working Effectively with Especially Challenging Behaviors," is so very helpful to me. I've lived in a cohousing community for several years now, and have basically had to figure out just about everything she outlines in the articles. I am currently quietly doing my own thing, have withdrawn from three committees that have bullies, and focus on being a good community member in the ways that I can. I keep my head down and stay civil, but don't engage more deeply with the folks who need to control others. Please thank Diana for her work and insights.

Cohousing is such a lovely ideal. I remain committed to doing the best that I can and offering my support to those who are interested in truly doing the work of intentional community. And it *is* work.

Name withheld by request

## Consider before Tossing

Re. Diana Leafe Christian's outstanding series on dealing with difficult persons in community: I read Dr. Ramani Durvasula's excellent book *Don't You Know Who I Am?* (and listened to the Elvis song "Do You Know Who I Am"). It seems clear that many difficult persons have talents/successes, a history of being abused themselves, and the described toxic behaviours. North America is a culture of narcissism so there will be some narcissists (clinically disordered or otherwise) in every community. Thus the goal whenever possible should be a process of healthy boundaries and compassion for the victims, selecting leaders of conscience, good policies/processes, and having therapeutic supports within communities without expelling every difficult person. I note that some of the characters described in the article stayed within their communities for a long time and that Diana Leafe Christian did describe some alternatives such as in the community with the improved consensus process to prevent endless blocking. If every egotist is tossed out, then their actual talents are lost!

Anne R.

Toronto, Ontario

## Anabaptism and Responsibility

Dear Chris,

Your words matching Freedom with Responsibility reminded me of my Anabaptist roots wherein Responsibility won out—to *thine own self be true*.

I love reading **COMMUNITIES**. For me it's like *déjà vu* all over again as to what is the story of my 92 years on Earth in community.

Keep it up.

Roger Ulrich

Lake Village Homestead  
Kalamazoo, Michigan

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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 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**

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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.

# A Few Words on Adaptation



Chris Roth

**Trigger warning:** *The following piece begins with potentially annoying self-effacement and self-satire—but progresses, perhaps, beyond it, using that portal to transcend that portal, in the tradition of the greatest and worst stand-up comics. Please either hang in there, or turn the page quickly!*

Every issue, I as editor face a dilemma: How do I write an introduction that does not serve to *lower* the average quality of thought, insight, and writing in the issue?

In some issues I simply punt, using as an excuse the abundance of actual articles, leaving “no space” for my Notes from the Editor. The article descriptions in the Table of Contents then serve as Trojan Horses for whatever small amounts of self-expression I may be needing to get out of my system.

In others, I've already asked Yulia to save two pages for me. If there's anything I'm really bad at, it's being OK with not following through on something I've committed to. So I have to take my chances that my contribution will not tarnish the issue too much. Sometimes it may even burnish it, especially if I don't obsess about every word both forwards and backwards, discover a rat in “tarnish,” then suspect that, even in the case of “burnish,” there may still be a rub.

Words are clearly one way we adapt to a changing world—and the world may be nothing if not changing. Compared with the vast majority of species on earth, many of whom human-precipitated changes have brought to the brink of survival (or indeed driven extinct), we are remarkably adept at adaptation, and words may have something to do with that. Whether for good or ill, words help us as a species evolve our understandings, adjust our behaviors, become more skilled at living within the environments we enter and then, inevitably, help shape. In each circumstance, our understandings, behaviors, and ways of living may contain serious, even fatal flaws, yet in the short term at least, they have gotten us to where we are. Whether illuminating deeper truths or tantalizing lies, words have facilitated that journey.

This is the 200th collection of words (give or take, accounting for a few joined issues as well as some extra unnumbered collections) that COMMUNITIES has gathered and sent out into the world. Each time, we hope that we are illuminating truths, helping precipitate changes that are good for people and the planet, rather than leading people down self-destructive paths predicated upon illusions. This is why we prioritize person-



al stories, rather than grand pronouncements or manifestos. COMMUNITIES has more in common with the work of Studs Terkel than the work of any theorist who purports to have the whole truth themselves rather than letting the world speak for itself. In a world of nearly incomprehensible diversity, this can mean that the truths to be found are also incredibly diverse, even, at times, in contradiction with one another—at least when looked at superficially.

If COMMUNITIES told an unchanging, single story—for example, of an easy-to-follow, simple path to “redemption through community”—I and likely most readers would have tired of its articles long ago. Its contents would also not reflect the complex realities we discover in real life. To borrow from the cultural moment, we cannot inhabit Barbie Land (nor its fragile usurper, Ken-Dom) forever. The Real World is where we find ourselves. It’s also where an amazing array of courageous efforts to Do Things Differently have occurred, and will continue to occur, as long as we succeed in averting extinction ourselves. COMMUNITIES exists partly to draw attention to the wide array of these efforts, and partly to share, among established and new practitioners, the many challenges as well as joys inherent in such projects, and responses to those challenges, hoping to make others’ paths a little easier within a community of shared stories in which the benefits of the storytelling are always flowing both ways.

Even when I write nothing myself (although it is dawning on me that this is **not** the case this time), I find myself fully engaged in this garden of stories. Not everyone does the planting; weeders as well as readers are often necessary for a satisfying harvest, and pruners can come in handy too. Even metaphor-mixers may have a place; after all, we live in a world of both gradual change and sudden change. Adaptation to the curveballs of language as well as of reality is a necessary skill.

If consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, then my Editor’s mind is either smaller than little or a little bit bigger. At one moment, my favorite article is the funniest article—in this issue, almost certainly, “Contemplating the Honey Locust.” Comparing himself to that thorny tree, the author admits: “I don’t think I ever really wanted to live in community, but here I am, and I somehow seem adapted to it. An old honey locust will sometimes lose its thorns after a while, and maybe the pods even conceal a slightly sweeter honey. I myself have proved too difficult to cut down and replace on this old worn-out pasture edge, and now I’m a part of the landscape. My defenses are still up, I’m hard to hug, but I’m doing okay here.” This bittersweet humor, not without pathos, is one path to the spirit of “truth” that seems the only legitimate reason to ask for readers’ attention.

On the other end of the spectrum are pieces like “Finding Hope in the Face of Powerlessness,” the shortest and, for me personally, the most powerful piece of writing in this issue. I have watched the same butte the author describes being gradually whittled down, though I didn’t know the childhood friends the author now mourns. I can relate to the sense of loss and heartbreak, and am inspired by the author’s answer to it, after sharing the depths of several devastating losses that have led her to find, nevertheless, elements of life to build on: “We can take what has crumbled and create something new, remembrance and prayers, soft dust and tears, innocence and hope.”

Then there are pieces like “Covid Comes to the Farm,” in which storylines familiar to many communitarians during the pandemic come to life, despite the challenges any author may encounter addressing relational wounds that may still be raw, traumas in community life that may still be fresh. By talking about them, we begin to deal with them: “The rhetoric got pretty intense (for us pacifists) at times, with many expressions of youthful vigor and a sense of invincibility. We were told we were just ‘old and afraid,’ that young people weren’t afraid of Covid.... ‘You choose isolation; we choose connection.’ ‘You choose fear; we choose love.’ ... We constantly heard refrains that The Farm had ‘lost our spirituality’ because we did not agree with their more anarchistic approach.”

In a couple cases, the stories of Adaptation in this issue themselves involved processes of adaptation. One article is a first-ever English translation of portions of the book

*Loger à la même adresse*, in which cooperation between the editor, the author, and Google Translate resulted in something likely much more useful to most of our English-language readers than the original French would have been. Another is an edited excerpt from *Social Forestry*, a book by one of my original permaculture teachers, in which, again with author cooperation, the process of corraling material from a less-generally-accessible form (book-length, often nonlinear) into one more accessible to magazine readers became its own kind of truth-seeking quest. Other pieces in this issue required less intervention; others sometimes require more; but in every case, by the time they reach readers, the stories shared in COMMUNITIES have already been a product of collective experience and crafting, often involving others in an author’s own circle as well. As in community itself, we hope that the collective effort helps us move closer to truth, rather than reinforcing illusion—yet vigilance about that latter danger is also always in order.

The reality is that words are just words, and, especially in this digital age, meaningless words can be churned out endlessly. The discipline and pleasure of editing COMMUNITIES is the practice of sharing words that matter and may make a difference. As Thich Nhat Hanh wrote, “A finger pointing at the moon is not the moon.” The more a piece of writing may attempt to describe the metaphorical moon, as *Social Forestry* and many of our authors’ contributions may do, the greater the risk of “falling short.”

But if we remember that the words are fingers, we may find that they are not pointing in vain. Words are not only a means of communication but also an exercise in imagination, both qualities essential for our species (often held back by failures in both) to embrace adaptation. 🌱

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*Chris Roth edits COMMUNITIES while attempting to adapt to whatever life brings him—for the last several years, a sabbatical from daily engagement with his home community in Oregon in order to care for a parent. He welcomes correspondence at [editor@gen-us.net](mailto:editor@gen-us.net).*



# Contemplating the Honey Locust

By Ben Brownlow

Are you at all familiar with honey locust trees? (*Gleditsia tricanthos* for my Latin speakers out there.) It's a fairly common pioneer species out here in Northeast Missouri, the ecological landbase for Sandhill Farm, Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage, and Red Earth Farms. I like to think of our Tri-Communities here as mutations of each other. Sandhill sprang up as an egalitarian farm, Dancing Rabbit as a fairly lofty experiment in village-scale community, and Red Earth as conglomerate of homesteads held in trust. Each variation on shared and simple living has formed to respond to some condition or pressure, ecological, social, or whatever. We're all a short bike ride from beautiful Rutledge, Missouri, and on that ride, one will encounter many honey locust trees.

The honey locust, for those unfamiliar, is not a popular tree in its prevailing form. It is an evolutionary anachronism, armed with an intimidating sheath of branched spines to prevent long-extinct mastodons, giant sloths, giant beavers, and other megafauna from damaging it, because it's good at setting boundaries, even with members of the ecosystem that it needs. The honey locust produces sugary, nutritious pea-like pods. The hard seeds contained within germinate best when passed through the digestive tract of herbivores, and thus, we have a stubborn, prickly tree that can not only endure the hostile terrain of heavy animal impact, but requires some significant evolutionary pressure to thrive.

With the megafauna gone, the honey locust remains. It's a difficult tree to love, even for tree huggers. The six inch spikes are a big part of its bad reputation. Once in a while, somebody around here gets impaled by one. We try to tell our visitors, who've largely escaped here from urban drudgery, that going around barefoot and/or touching unfamiliar vegetation is not recommended, but like a lot of important stuff at Dancing Rabbit, there's isn't, nor should there be, an explicit policy on footwear. Step on one, and you'll likely adapt, if you make it.

At Dancing Rabbit, we have some ecological covenants and sustainability guidelines. When DR formed in the late '90s, we, like most intentional communities, had to get something written down, saying what we were doing and why it's important. While climate change has always been a thing, especially since the development of a global industrial society, it wasn't a thing folks seemed to talk a lot about. And so our dear founders, who I hope still read COMMUNITIES, set out to create some covenants for sane and ecological living in community. Many of them, if adopted more widely, would directly address our carbon footprint and changing climate, but the words *climate change*, *carbon footprint*, or *greenhouse gas emissions* do not explicitly show up in either the covenants, or the sustainability guidelines. The covenants and guidelines are something of an evolutionary anachronism, an adaptive mutation that continues to benefit the organism in a changed environment.

At DR, we have an ecological covenant about lumber sourcing, and trust me, I'll spare you the details on how that works. It was intended, I think, to address unsustainable forestry practices, which are still a thing, but was very much front and center in environmental media in the '90s. I'd say that it's perhaps, mildly ironic that as a land trust focused on ecosystem restoration, one of our biggest tasks related to restoring our native prairie is cutting out and destroying increasing legions of trees and woody growth: autumn olive, eastern red cedar, pin oak, elm, and yes, honey locust. But don't

get too upset, I assure you many of those tree populations remain overly abundant. Naturally, as an ecology-focused community, we do not want to support unsustainable forestry practices. While we still do not have an explicit covenant on carbon and greenhouse gas emissions, we'll probably deal with it eventually. And so here we are, an armored arboreal form on the edge of a run-down former pasture, a thorn on all sides ready to resist the advancement of complete extraction and degradation.

But the honey locust doesn't only put up defenses and protect itself. It has the potential to enrich soil, nurture other living things, and even help restore some ecological balance. As the dust bowl era (the one that happened in the 30's; there's more than one and bound to be more) ravaged farmland across the broad and once fertile heart of America, the government began to encourage farmers to plant honey locust as a conservation practice. Few other plantings could survive the climate conditions of the dust bowl and provide some form of nutrition to hungry cattle herds, but the honey locust was not only well adapted to a windswept and soil-less wasteland, but could actually hold onto the remaining topsoil, provide a dappled shade that held down humidity and provided shelter to livestock, feed them, and, arguably, fix nitrogen in the damaged earth. The last bit, as to whether or not *Gleditsia tricanthos* is a nitrogen-fixing tree, has not been consensed upon by researchers, and I think we all know what that's like. Regardless, honey locust is a generous, if prickly, provider.

I can relate.

I don't think I ever really wanted to live in community, but here I am, and I somehow seem adapted to it. An old honey lo-



cust will sometimes lose its thorns after a while, and maybe the pods even conceal a slightly sweeter honey. I myself have proved too difficult to cut down and replace on this old worn-out pasture edge, and now I'm a part of the landscape. My defenses are still up, I'm hard to hug, but I'm doing okay here, and I think I may even be providing something, even if there's no consensus to that effect.

We can try to grow communities with a very clear plan, a clear set of expectations, and a clear vision and they will most certainly attract a very specific kind of person that we want. Think of it as a well-tended garden, or maybe a monocrop, if you will. It is an efficient way to achieve specific goals, and as long as conditions are favorable, your community will prosper and thrive, just like all those mastodons and enormous sloths. But I don't really know about any communities like that. More often than not, we get some weeds in the cracks, and those weeds end up becoming the thorn trees that we always needed.

An adaptive trait, like a tasty fruit or a sharp thorn, may outlive its intended purpose. In ecological systems, this trait then either remains adaptive for some other reason, or becomes maladaptive and leads to the organism's demise. I think that along the spectrum from self to community to ecosystem to global culture, we're going to need to investigate which of our traits should remain and which should be allowed to go obsolete. As our current intentional communities movement undergoes the same social, political, economic, and environmental stresses as the the rest of the world, from pandemics to climate migration to the rise of populist fascism, we'll want to take stock of how we'll adapt, and in what ways we already are.

There's sweet honey in amongst the spikes and barbs; will we harvest it? 🌿

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Photos by Ben Brownlow



# Trees for the Future: Agroforestry at Dancing Rabbit

By Ben Brownlow

*The following is adapted from a blog post published December 21, 2022 at [dancingrabbit.org/newsletter/when-humans-and-trees-cooperate](https://dancingrabbit.org/newsletter/when-humans-and-trees-cooperate).*



It seems there are a lot of possible ways our world might look, 10 or 15 years from now. There are even a few highly probable forecasts for our global future—some of them good news, such as increased renewable energy production, some of them clearly not so much, e.g., melting ice caps. From where I view the world currently, the frozen and windswept slopes of Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage, Northeast Missouri, I can look 15 years into the future and see abundant food, healthy soil, clean air and water, and meaningful work. But mostly, I see trees, or as some of my neighbors might say, brush. Perennial woody biomass. Nut and fruit trees. Nitrogen fixing trees. NFTs, if you will.

There are a lot of bogus investment opportunities out there, folks, and in the next decade many more, like crypto-currency (translation: not real money), non-fungible tokens (translation: can't make change with it), and whole essential oil micro-pyramids that will likely rise and fall, taking some unfortunate investors down with them. I suppose we have this privilege, here in the affluent Western world. Before I go forward, a request that nobody explains “block chain” to me, again. Others have tried, but I wasn't paying attention. As long as folks are having fun and not hurting anybody, I don't care what they pursue.

Now, I grant you, I may not be rolling in it. I mean, I've rolled in many things, just not hundred dollar bills, though I'm told the price of manure is rising. Fertility, now that's fungible. Fungal, even. I would estimate that my coveralls smell like no less than \$2,500. We're talking Gucci numbers here. But, I digress. And I ask you, dear reader, a question: What will have more value a decade or two from now, a mature Chinese

chestnut tree that cycles carbon into the soil and drops 50-100 pounds of carbohydrates onto the ground annually without the aid of fossil-fuel-based equipment, or a literal file of an image of a monkey, or if you prefer, a literal file of an image of Donald Trump as a cowboy? What kinda NFT do you think will serve us better?

When I view the future from where I stand now, I can imagine the harvest season. This year, the air is crisp, the sun is present, though I'm sure some years it will be a bit cold, wet, and miserable. A large wagon, perhaps horse-drawn, is parked centrally in an expansive grove of trees. All kinds of people have gathered, little people, big people, some are old, some are young, and they have gathered to bring in bushels of fresh chestnuts. With gloves and tools they comb the dappled orchard for spiny chestnuts in their husks. The wagon lurches down one lane and back around to the next as gaggles of playful children hurl sharp, spiky husks at each other. (Let's be honest, that's bound to happen.) Further up the slope, a herd of pigs and turkeys glean what's been left behind, breaking the pest cycles in this organically managed orchard. Everyone involved, from the harvest and collection, maintenance and management of the orchard, to the processing, packing, and marketing of the chestnuts, is able to receive some amount of supplemental income (it's all mostly supplemental here) in addition to pretty much as many chestnuts as they'd care to consume.

Further afield, a small herd of dairy cows lazes and ruminates in the dappled shade of high-production honey locust trees. They belch a faintly molasses-like perfume as they chew the sugar-rich

Pods, building fat and muscle for the winter ahead. These cows, alongside other livestock and all the wildlife present in this harmonious system, are welcome to the remaining persimmons, hanging like amber sugar plums and littering the pasture floor. Further downhill are hickories, pecans, and oaks, soon to mast an abundance of fats and proteins. In the loft of the goat barn, bags and bales of mulberry leaf sit, ready to provide nourishment and precious, perennial protein (as high as alfalfa, but much easier to grow in our soils). Just one day, in the future, where every creature, human or otherwise, is directly benefiting from the investment made in a few simple tree plantings. Alright, some of the tree plantings may be quite complex to implement, but I still believe irrigation makes more sense than “block chain.”

Many of us here in the Tri-Communities (that is Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage, Red Earth Farms, and Sandhill) are beginning the work of establishing an agroforestry cooperative. Let me break it down real quick. **Agroforestry** is, in essence, tree-based agriculture. Unlike a standard orchard, in which one crop is being produced per unit of land, agroforestry is integrative. The spaces between trees might contain some annual crop, such as rye, or garlic, or cut flowers. It may host livestock, like bees, or chickens, or geese, or sheep, which, by the way, will not be my job to manage. A well-planned and implemented agroforestry project blends seamlessly with the natural environment as well as the

surrounding human community. It is an orchard, but it is also a playground, a place for wildlife, a space for meditation, and a biological filter that provides positive impacts downstream.

**Agroforestry is interactive.** In a world where GPS-driven tractors and drone seeding are becoming more and more commonplace across vast tracts of land, agroforestry creates a mutually beneficial relationship between people and place. A tree planting is a place where children can play, elders can exercise and reflect, and the rest of us can toil, I suppose. My eventual hopes for this project are that friends and neighbors from our wider community in Northeast Missouri can interact with it and have the opportunity to share knowledge and insights into this agricultural alternative.

**Agroforestry is intensive.** Back up a moment with me, and let’s look at how trees cycle carbon. Each leaf on a tree is like a solar panel. Through photosynthesis, whereby a plant combines CO<sub>2</sub>, water, and sunlight to create sugar and oxygen, this solar factory can store carbon in the soil (battery). We all know this, I think. All plants with chlorophyll do this, some of them very efficiently, so long as the soil is minimally disturbed. The thing that makes trees especially efficient in this regard is that their means of solar collection, leaves, are very high up off the ground as compared to grasses or annual crops. As the sun moves across the sky, trees are able to photosynthesize in



Photos by Ben Brownlow



three dimensions. When planted at the appropriate spacing, a human-implemented and maintained tree planting can sequester more carbon than either open grassland or a naturally occurring, unmanaged forest in our climate. And so agroforestry allows us the opportunity to not only collect sunlight and store carbon intensively; the very “three-dimensional” nature can create opportunities to yield multiple harvests. Calorie-wise, a tree planting that hosts pasture for livestock and room for vegetables within the footprint of the orchard can be sizable; an efficient land use plan for our region.

Finally, **agroforestry is intentional**. There are a lot of opportunities in the world to plant trees, or pay for somebody else to plant trees and hope they really did it, and there are equal amounts of opportunities for well-meaning (or downright nefarious) individuals to kill or neglect trees. Particularly with nursery-grown stock, which have a high carbon cost, doing a bad job at planting trees by not caring for them afterward, or putting them in an unsuitable location, isn't doing the planet any favors. And as a person who has killed many a tree in my career, I just won't have it anymore.

As for what a **cooperative** is, in the context of this project, it's an opportunity for people to enable each other to do big things, to share in work and responsibility, and perhaps make a meager, if honest, buck together. It's a way to generate food security and right livelihood well into the future, far past when I'm gone or finished with the project myself. A cooperative is an opportunity for new or newly inspired villagers to have access to tools, labor, land, and money for building their own tree-based dreams, be they basketmaking, mushroom farming, forest medicine, maple sugaring, fruit, timber; anything where some roots remain firm in the earth.

2023 is our inaugural year of developing and implementing agroforestry at DR. Some initial projects slated include harvesting and inoculating logs for shiitake mushroom production, developing a holistic timber stand improvement plan which can blaze the trail for forest farming, silvopasture, and invasives management, reducing our fire risk, sequestering carbon and improving our compost systems through biochar production, and planting some initial selected native tree crops for dual human and livestock use (silvopasture).

In the first year we're keeping the projects small yet impact-

ful, diverse yet relatively uncomplicated, and attainable enough that I am confident they can all be accomplished. My hopes in helping to develop this cooperative are that we will have a sense of how many resources—labor, financial, and excitement-wise—there are to commit before implementing a much larger agroforestry goal in 2024. And I can do this all for approximately 1/10th the cost of a bitcoin...probably closer to an 1/8th by the time you read this (but without my cost going up).

Look, folks, there's a lot of things out there without tangible value. And some of us work very hard to acquire them. And it turns out, some of those things that we work so very hard for ultimately don't even have an intangible value. They are, it turns out, completely without value. And there's a lot of these things, and there are whole industries and marketing schemes out there that spend quite a lot of time, effort, and energy trying to convince us otherwise. I'm too busy, too tired, and probably too honest to try that here. I think trees have value, beyond board feet, or bushels per acre. They have value as part of an ecosystem. They have value in our atmospheric and hydrologic cycles. They have value according to the wildlife that derive shelter and sustenance from them. Our human communities, too, have long valued trees, for the shelter of their shade, their abundance of material gifts, as places to gather, landmarks on the horizon, or even as friends we've grown up with.

We're talking about communities coming together to plant trees for the future, y'all. I don't need to market that to you, do I? It ain't a file of an image of a cartoon ape...it's something a bit more durable than that, I think. Roots in the ground. It seems that in this age and economy, from the concrete world of transient urban renters to the self-imposed rootlessness of homeowners' associations and the acres upon acres of field-scale row cropping that cannot economically afford the margins and edges created by trees, the simple act of putting roots in the ground is an act of rebellion, if not hope. Let's make a change for the better that'll last a couple centuries. 🌱

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*Ben Brownlow is something of a traditional skills nerd, manure manager, hog drover, turkey herder, and orchardist. For over a decade he has led a radically simple life in community. He relishes low standards in all things except food. Updates on his projects can be found at [benjaminbramble.substack.com](http://benjaminbramble.substack.com).*



# Tending the Land as People of Place

By Tomi Hazel Vaarde

*The following article is excerpted and adapted with permission from pages ix, 28-30, 32-34, and 74-79 of Social Forestry: Tending the Land as People of Place by Tomi Hazel Vaarde, Synergetic Press, Santa Fe and London, 2023.*



Photos courtesy of [www.siskiyoupermaculture.org](http://www.siskiyoupermaculture.org)

## We Start the Practice, and Carry the Vision

Social Forestry gathers the vision, the people, and all participants of Place together. People of Place learn to steward a drainage basin to ensure the return of Salmon, Beaver, Fire, and thus resilience and persistence. All the Non-Human-Beings, across the landscape, come into relationship with Human tending.

Social Forestry cultures learn from Indigenous cultures (First Nations). Creation stories, trickster stories, epic tales, and deep memory is an ultimate gift if we are so blessed. We also learn from careful observation, assembled books and hard-copy resources, apprenticeships, mentoring, community salon and council, working together, direct feedback from Nature, patterns and systems savvy, reading the landscape, deep-ecology ethics, art, dance, song, epics, science fiction, and celebration.

Social Forestry is the culture of forest people. The forest is the source of multiple benefits. A society that understands the value of the forest will be persistent and sustainable. The culture that embraces Social Forestry lives in close identity with the local slopes, glens, and drainages: a Place.

Social Forestry is a cultural fabric woven in Place. The ecologically managed forest delivers surpluses of seasonal products to a culture that uses those benefits in daily life. The community of Humans finds the variable work and materials—and the turn of the year—to be an organizing flow for festivals, rituals, and household practices. This natural economic life is as diverse as the ecological mosaic of the forest. The ethics and principles of the culture support a continuous, ongoing interaction with the forest.

One can see long-established Social Forestries in traditional villages around the world that have forested drainage basins. Seasonal celebrations and product-rich lives have thrived over generations from deep time. The forestry practices are learned in context and taught by stories and apprenticeship. Both the Human culture and the forest context are thus stable, resilient, and healthy.

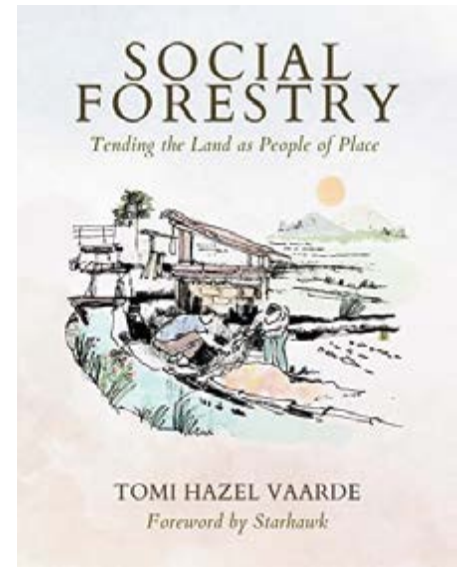
Social Forestry, done well and attentively, holds the potential to heal the landscape and our relations to Place. As part of our tending, we will find opportunities to “skim” natural processes without betraying our principles and best intentions. We can live beauti-

fully, simply, and well, sharing the bounty of a vibrant drainage basin.

The challenge is the Transition. Modern colonialist consumers are blind to their condition. Times are changing and much needs sorting out—the truth of the extractive empire, for a start. Most settlers are displaced people themselves, moving into occupied territories and displacing the original people with inappropriate means of extraction for industrial speculation. And that is the shorthand summary: Displaced folks displacing other folks without learning where they had arrived and how to behave properly in this new, strange stolen land. In some cases, the locals actually offered to teach cooperation and limits but the driving force of Empire predominated, destroyed, and took dominion over the spoils.

This requirement of humble submission to limits is tough on the opportunistic, peripatetic Humans. But the gift of language and culture brought us ways to cooperate and share. An ordered local culture of settlers can grow into the wisdom of careful tending. The process of becoming a people of Place is not impossible. New settler cultures that show restraint,





caution, and humility can eventually come into supportive mutual aid with nearby remaining First Nations and nearby drainage basin councils.

The collapse of complex societies is a repetitive pattern in the epic tales. A concentrating and extractive empire eventually implodes under the weight of postponed infrastructure repairs, speculative exuberance, unbalanced debt bubbles, and excessive complication. The global consumer-industrial spasm is doomed. The present appetite tries to swallow two earths constantly while perched on only one. The future of institutional and corporate collapse and chaos is messy.

The very well-used traditional way to survive and rebuild is called re-localization. The goal is to dig in and dig out, surf the random salvage opportunities, and dodge the waves of disaster. The ecological term for Places that support survival and persistence is *refugia*. With a bit of old held wisdom, and the clear intention of being useful, we will find wonder in the work of Social Forestry.

## Transition Times

In times of chaotic change, the myth of the Tower of Babel comes to mind. The languages diversify and fragment as the tower falls. As the Quakers say, “The book, it will perish, and the steeple will fall, but the truth will be there at the end of it all.” Just as we now ground ourselves in local truths, for reasons of persistence and preservation of wisdom, so have remote communities in the past. Ecosteries, monastic tenders, are one model of redemptive tending. These refugia of knowledge can be an intentional community of preservation and practice, a life boat for turbulent times.

The local transition efforts of retro-feudal manor farms, hoop culture camps, drainage basin councils, and community inventory can be supported by federal stewardship contracts on the commons, caretaker cottager cooperatives, inter-agency science and modeling, nonprofit research and advocacy, international earth repair congresses, and educational campuses re-oriented toward greater coordination and a sharing of common goals between departments.

Subsistence cottagers, nomadic graziers, and Indigenous horticulturalists have been re-

moved from the commons, in waves, for centuries. In these times, healthy villages that had protected and maintained natural resources and did not contribute to the commodities-based global economy, have disappeared. National parks remove and exclude local, traditional people, their cultural activities, and access to their sacred sites.

With a bit of enlightened subsidy, or at least no taxation, knowledgeable local stewards who are allowed to remain will maintain ecosystem functions and contribute to global eco-restoration. Governments need to focus on supporting re-localization and de-growth, especially in the face of climate weirding. So perhaps the time has come to turn around a great disgrace and destruction.

## Sociology in the Forest

Social Forestry explores the shapes of relationships. With experience in the woods, access to deep narratives of old forest cultures, and our visionary scenarios, we nurture the entanglement of mutuality in Forests.

First and foremost, we do forestry and Horticulture in groups of cooperators. To do this socially means to avoid both industrial methods (loud machines) and looking exclusively for a single product or raw commodity through extraction. This also means avoiding ways of working that separate us from our natural cohorts and from sensitive consideration of all the dimensions.

As Social Foresters, we are returning to social relations with the natural entities that comprise a forested Place. Lots to



learn from careful observation and from working together to celebrate social skills and cultural ways, such as craft specialty guilds, clan and family alliances, deep remembering, and visionary story telling. Collective decision making, spokescouncils, etiquette, and taboos are the shapes of good Human social order. Ecology is social, relationships are the web that holds and nourishes us all.

This is a way to escape the hyper-individual “self-improvements” and the compulsive consuming that “globalism” has infected us with, and subjected us to. Instead, we can reach to find comfort in dancing endless cycles, and with just enough Human artifacts. How much material consumption do we really need to feel engaged and useful? How can we work together to do eco-restoration in ways that also supply our basic needs (not wants)? Can we find humility through tending the complexity of forests where we will be learning to return to the seasonal cycles of traditional Horticulture?

## Coming into Home at Wolf Gulch and Little Wolf Gulch

When the project at Wolf Gulch opened up in 1999, I was entranced with the pocket desert forest mosaic. My new friends, Maud and Tom, wanted to find a farm that no one thought could be farmed. When we toured Wolf Gulch, and it was so run down, I did notice the tall Star Thistle and basic irrigation layout. There was only a small spring deep in the downcut gulch and a slow well and the irrigation water had been turned off in

1962. You can see the results on YouTube if the satellites are still up.

After we did all the earthworks and infrastructure upgrades to support a seed-growing farm, I looked at the adjacent 40-acre Little Wolf Gulch that we had labeled “wilderness.” I asked if I could negotiate a life-lease and establish a forestry camp and start tending the wilderness. Maud and Tom agreed. Twenty years later we have lots of stories to tell. And we learned to burn safely. Feels like home.

Little Wolf Gulch (LWG) is a 40-acre section of Wolf Gulch Ranch in the Little Applegate Valley of Southern Oregon. Wolf Gulch Ranch includes Wolf Gulch Farm where a 20-acre community supported agriculture and seed growing business has been ongoing since 2000. The community of seasonal workers and residents varies between eight and 20 people, a small hamlet. The ranch is located in a pocket desert, one of the driest places in western Oregon, that sees as little as 10 inches of rain a year and as much as 30 inches. Three steep gulches cross the ranch: Wolf Gulch itself, in the middle, has 13 head gullies. The east gulch, almost always dry, is undeveloped, with a small drainage basin. Little Wolf Gulch, on the west, has four head gullies that start on the ridge of Little Bear Butte.

This area also has: Very high wildfire potential. Rattlesnakes, Ticks, and Poison Oak. Mountain Lions and perhaps Wolves already. Isolation, peace, and quiet, which is hard on some people. No cell phone service. Difficult to find as even GPS does not work here: one needs to read maps and follow directions. The canyon is a “low signal environment.” Dirt road with blind hairpin curves. Hunters, loggers, pot growers, and radical hippies. Hard working ranchers and farmers.

When we found this derelict ranch in the late 1990s it was a mess, with a view. The gulches all run to the south and the view is of the Siskiyou Crest where the Pacific Crest Trail runs along a 6,000-foot ridge line with 7,000-foot mountains; Dutchman’s Peak is due south. The Powells and their extended family wanted to find a farm that no one



1. Maitland, Sara. *From the Forest: A Search for the Hidden Roots of Our Fairy Tales*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2012. Berman, Morris. *Wandering God: A Study in Nomadic Spirituality*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000. Martin, Calvin Luther. *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982 (1978).



thought could be successful. After Tom and Maud had been to Ladakh in northwest India, they were impressed with difficult but farmed landscapes. We like to modestly suggest that there is nothing at Wolf Gulch Ranch that anyone thought was valuable: no water, no timber, no gold, no aggregates, lots of star thistle, and rundown buildings.

The ranch was first homesteaded in the 1880s and the Sterling Ditch, a mining canal constructed on the range above the ranch, provided irrigation water to all three gulches until 1962, when the diversion was closed. After the end of irrigation water the ranch was largely abandoned and we bought it for less than the price of any other properties that we looked at. After a lot of planning, heavy equipment work, and a big new house construction project, we were able to start farming with water from a spring in Wolf Gulch and we got a winter diversion permit to fill our ponds.

The Little Wolf Gulch section of the ranch is classified as wilderness on the ranch plan. We have developed a net of trails and a small forestry camp to support the farm and reduce fire hazards. LWG is a fire laboratory: the Cantrell Gulch fire burned half of the land in 1987 and we have since restored and under-burned acres of remnant Oak/Pine savannah. This landscape was burned regularly, every three to five years, by the Dakubetede First Nations people, who were removed during the gold rush of the mid-1800s. Tree rings show fires since the removals on a 20-year cycle. A lot of remnant ethnobotany is still persistent, especially geophytes and basketry stools. This landscape is fire-explosive with thick chaparral, grown up since regular broadscale burning ended with the removal of First Nations people. We have two charcoal kilns and multiple burn pile sites.

Little Wolf Gulch is also a laboratory for simple living and post-fossil-carbon lifestyles. The vision is that small organic farms in the larger Applegate Valley could have small forestry operations that provide biochar while doing fuel reduction to protect the farms. Alternative forestry products can be marketed to support the forest workers. Oregon has a history of laws and principles that support forestry such as “access to economic opportunities,” “temporary housing for seasonal workers,” and “work camps for forestry activities.” We at Wolf Gulch Ranch demonstrate ways to support people

and farms, while we restore periodic “cool burning” fire to the landscape, hopefully to avoid catastrophic, hot wildfires. We demonstrate how we might have Humans living again in close relationship to Place while doing restoration and stabilization work.

The daunting future of climate change and the backlog of excess fuel on this landscape suggest the benefits of a re-localization culture. We have been teaching about this and envisioning through Siskiyou Permaculture with our Permaculture Design Course (PDC) and our advanced Permaculture courses including Social Forestry, Optical Surveying, and Ethnobotany.

We have also been developing value-added products and tools that support de-consumerization, systems of living that do not use imported energy. This is ambitious and not very lucrative, but does get Humans back on the land and in close contact with Nature and healthy living. So far we have produced several types and grades of charcoal, firewood, building poles, baskets, natural buildings from on-site materials, and decorative products for ornamentation that celebrate Place.



## A Day in the Life of Little Wolf Gulch

After an intern completes the application process and goes through the get-to-know-you trial and orientation, the intern sets up house holding. We have found that the chores of “simple living” take about four hours a day and so we are lucky to get four to six hours a day to work on projects. During breakfast, we discuss the plans for the day after we have assessed the weather and opportunities.

Meals are a good time for planning, reports, and sharing, with at least one meal a day as a community meal. Meal planning and preparation are part of the daily chores. We mostly eat meals that take some preparation ahead of time: Perhaps we have to soak something, or grind something, or cook for a while, or wildcraft some greens. The cabins in LWG and the classroom in Wolf Gulch have wood stoves and we try to avoid using propane or butane stoves. In most weather we can cook on charcoal stoves in open shelters.

Drinking water in this desert forest is part of our challenge. Wildlife has access



## TWO BABY SKUNKS

*As learned from Tom Phelps at Camp Wakapominee, early 1960s, Adirondack Mountains.*

ONCE THERE WERE TWO BABY SKUNKS.  
 ONE WAS NAMED IN,  
 AND ONE WAS NAMED OUT.  
 SOMETIMES, OUT WAS IN AND IN WAS OUT.  
 OTHER TIMES, IN WAS IN AND OUT WAS OUT.  
 WELL, ONE DAY, IN WAS OUT,  
 AND OUT WAS IN,  
 SO, THE MOTHER SKUNK SENT OUT OUT TO  
 BRING IN IN.  
 OUT WENT OUT AND BROUGHT IN IN  
 RIGHT AWAY!  
 THEN, MOTHER SKUNK ASKED OUT:  
 "HOW DID YOU DO THAT SO QUICKLY?"  
 AND OUT SAID, "SIMPLE, INSTINCT!"

*This is a storytelling exercise.*

The story is told with hand movements and facial expressions:

The left hand is IN and the right hand is OUT.

The hands flip back and forth separately, and together, side to side, following the action. The hands are raised on either side as MOTHER asks the question, and hang in the air at OUT's reply, feigning innocence with raised eyebrows.

—THV

to tree holes and the river in the canyon. We do bring in some spring water from off ranch but mostly we use rain water from barrels and tanks and mineral rich spring water, stored in a tank at LWG, from the few months that the gulch spring runs (March through June, in a good year).

Housing codes for small unpermitted buildings do not allow indoor plumbing; all our water is carried into the cabins in buckets and jugs. The tank-stored water needs to be filtered or boiled or both. Bathing is done in warm weather with solar-shower bags, and in cold weather with sponge-baths, inside the cabins. There is a sauna one mile away from LWG and we have started yarding materials to build a sauna nearer by.

In our Permaculture Design Course we talk about CLP: convenience, license, and privilege. These are attitudes that need examination to prepare for the post-fossil-fuel future. The industrial expectations of moderns demand shortcuts in order to meet the hurry-up demands of financial

capital and global trade, but these expectations of endless growth are killing the biosphere. The very old Zen saying "chop wood, carry water" is very much our practice at Little Wolf Gulch. This at best can lead to enlightenment.

Meanwhile we have some attitude adjustments to practice. When one is truly present, and aware of what it takes to live a good life, slowing down and paying attention have their own rewards. We try to avoid waste. We only go to town for special extras twice a month, which takes some planning. When we need something we do not just go to a store, we need to figure out how to do without, repair a tool, search our stashes, or use local materials.

Communications out here can be a challenge for folks who are used to checking their screens constantly. We are "off the grid" at Little Wolf Gulch. There is no cell phone reception. We have a satellite dish for internet powered by solar. Since we are using stand-alone small solar-electric systems, we do not have surplus power. That means we use very small area lights for reading and we only check email once or twice a day, depending on cloud cover.

Our deep-cell 90-pound batteries have to be carried in by wheelbarrow, and that means we do not have huge power storage reserves. All our cabins and the classroom have lights, but they are small and we have to budget our power uses. That includes recharging devices. This is righteous simplicity as well as learning to budget.

There is a landline at the main barn and house in Wolf Gulch but that, as we have already noted, is a mile away, uphill, and private. The closest cell phone reception is eight miles away by road and that means driving and using fossil fuel or an all-day bicycle trip.

The rural mail boxes are two miles away and down canyon, which is an athletic bike ride, perhaps to find someone has already picked it up, then returning to the farm in search. We tend to get our mail in town from a post office box twice a month!



We prefer to have interns stay at least two weeks, in order to get into the routine and become comfortable with all the new skills of off-the-grid living. Once an intern is accustomed to our ways, they are always welcome to return for a visit, as they already know how to fit in and have a good time. Sometimes we have special two-week intern programs and those are more intensive. New folks have to get with the program fast. We prefer that interns have already been to Wolf Gulch for a course, so that they have some idea what to expect.

The toilet systems are called “dry,” because they do not flush. That means Human manure composting and urine composting. We also compost all our food scraps. We do not want to tempt wildlife with messes, especially the Bears and Raccoons, so we clean up fast and we take out any smelly garbage and packaging that we cannot compost. There is a lot to learn about not interfering with wildlife while camping in the wilderness. Avoid temptation is the motto! Clean-culture requires some learning, Wash hands with minimum use of water! Avoid waste and garbage messes!

Then there are the forestry-work projects. We emphasize safe and skilled use of hand tools. We also emphasize attention to detail. We are doing complex forestry here and that means sorting the wood we are cutting into several categories. We are also using a lot of fire, so we have to be prepared in order to prevent any escapes; the ranch needs protection. We need to avoid any injuries and expect interns to be

responsible for their own safety! Our work is not industrial or continuous and unvaried; we take lots of breaks to discuss what we see going on and to plan our next moves. There is a lot to learn about identifying species, protecting sensitive ecological features, understanding the effects of our work, and finessing perfect timing.

The social aspect of our forestry includes getting along with each other and learning to coordinate our activities, as well as getting along with Nature and noticing subtleties. The forest misses Humans and modern Humans are mostly disconnected from the wildness that we evolved with for so many eons. This is a big part of Social Forestry; we all have a lot to learn about getting along with the landscape and each other. Hyper-individualistic moderns are insensitive to *others*, and self-centered in their priorities.

Social Forestry widens our priorities and emphasizes reciprocity and gratitude. The direct experience of Nature talking back to us is a powerful re-connection with our deep heritage. Reading the land and learning to talk back to—and listen to—all our Wild neighbors is polite and kind. We hope that everyone who spends some time in this special place-ness grows into maturity, with full hearts, ears, breath, touch, and taste. 🐦

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*This article is excerpted and adapted with permission from Social Forestry: Tending the Land as People of Place by Tomi Hazel Vaarde, Synergetic Press, Santa Fe and London, 2023.*

*Hazel sent this update along with permission to publish:*

*“Things have already changed at this land with climate weirding. The ranch will go on the market next year as the springs have totally failed for several years and almost all the big conifer trees have died. The north slopes across the canyon are filled with the red brown needles of dead Douglas Fir and Ponderosa Pines. Very complicated: the big trees in the gulches were all artifacts of mining and irrigation in the last century and appear to all be less than 130 years old; the desert forest was way overstocked from fire suppression and stupid logging; the climate has changed before many times in the last 10,000 years here and Humans adapted. Eco-grief can blind folks to the work that continues. There are ways to change viewpoint.*

*“All these dead trees are an embarrassment of carbon riches. If we were in Place here in coming years, there would be bonanzas of mushrooms, charcoal, log mulch, cants, and trail systems that move us closer to under-burning again.”*

*Tomi Hazel Vaarde is a long-time resident of the Southern Oregon/Mount Shasta bio-region, advising farms, stewarding forests, and teaching Environmental Sciences for more than 50 years. Hazel earned degrees in Forestry and Systemic Botany from Syracuse University and SUNY College of Forestry in 1969, and has since taught dozens of Permaculture courses and other courses and workshops. Hazel collaborates with Siskiyou Permaculture—see [siskiyoupermaculture.org](http://siskiyoupermaculture.org).*



# Adaptation and Resilience at Earthaven Ecovillage

By Arjuna da Silva

When my lifelong passion for community gave me the opportunity to become a cofounder of an ecovillage, I moved from Florida to Asheville, North Carolina and soon began to set myself up on the land a budding Earthaven Ecovillage was purchasing. In the course of a couple of decades, as I learned to accommodate body and soul to this environment, I also found the guidance, support, and good luck to develop a homesite, build an exceptionally beautiful and high-functioning natural house, and come to terms with how differently a project like ours could turn out than dreamed of for the first several intoxicatingly thrilling years.

Adaptation and resilience have been essential in this experience, not only for Earthaven and its ecovillage mission, but for me personally and others here. Many beloved friends have come and gone in my life over the years. This third decade has been a period of adjustment, to living solo, having some of my closest relationships yield to distance and death, and turning my attention away from the unrelenting draw of service to the group and more to undone priorities of my own.

## Appreciating Rustic Comfort

We don't much advertise our lifestyle details, but the truth is that the permaculture principles we established our community by are still highly functional and basic to life at Earthaven. I like to tell people that for years folks started out living on the land in tents, canvas yurts, and vintage trailers. And, I insist, it's still a good way to start out because it breaks into the attachment and familiarity with modern, industrial, fuel-dependent lifestyles that we all bring with us to this different set of intentions we call our ecovillage. It also makes us grateful for the improvements and perks we eventually get.

These days, folks who visit, including some who become interested or even enthralled with the possibilities of giving Earthaven a try, are mostly looking for places to rent, and possibly buy if it comes to joining. But available places here are very limited—and getting more so. Construction has always depended pretty much on need. A resident builder will come off their regular gig long enough to see if an expressed need for housing means it's a job for them. And there certainly isn't a lot of building going on that addresses rental housing, while what's been available so far is pretty much in use or going under contract. Starting out with a more simple shelter is still (or again) the easiest path to settling here right now.

I am the last person to like funkiness, except as a design concept. So I didn't

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After a while, time spent with housemates and neighbors and special friends rates much higher than most entertainment or distractions, on or off the land.

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*In the early days, folks had time to hand-build a bamboo fence all the way around the first large field.*

Photos courtesy of Arjuna da Silva



*Celebration with Earthaven founding and early members after Arjuna's move-in to Leela.*



turn away from some spic-n-span habits easily. I've had to learn a lot about health, cleanliness, and dis-ease, and it ain't what they teach us in school. However, the perks that come with a backwoods-type, rural lifestyle *in a vibrant community* deliver a quality of life that on-the-grid accomplishments and money just can't provide.

One of the first things visitors learn (hopefully) is that pooping in a bucket or outhouse is not the most detestable thing to do. But it does take more time (for residents) to manage and keep track of than the "one flick of the flusher" most of us were used to. I count nine septic systems at Earthaven (with a residential population of about 120 adults and children) serving six single-family residences and two duplexes, plus the one in the Village Center serving the public. This means that about 21 people use flush toilets and everyone else, or at least every other residence, either has their own poop bucket and humanure bin or uses a shared "dry mouldering" or other composting toilet, either in their neighborhood or their own building.

A wintertime visitor was recently astonished at the amount of organic "trash" (accumulated tree and ground fall) at the sides of our main road and found it unacceptable. What could we have been doing all Winter that kept us from cleaning up? My thoughts were that maybe we'd just had a big storm, or maybe the first part of a cleanup began with cutting branches and raking edges, and we hadn't pushed ourselves to do a follow-up neatness brigade yet. I'm sure it wasn't any resident's idea of a big mess. (As of today, May 31, the road's as tidy as it could ever be, thanks to the spectacular conglomeration of members and work-exchangers who show up weekly for important maintenance work, whether a roadside cleaning, a poison ivy "harvest" from areas most utilized by guests, a monthly shout-out for help at the dairy, or a firewood processing extravaganza.)

Meanwhile, our central Carbon Dump, right there on the main road and piled with cardboard and paper trash, branches, and other carbonaceous debris, is an aesthetically unappealing but educational look at what underlies the permaculture basics we want to adhere to, such as "turn waste into resources." Maybe it's a surprise for folks to discover that we can live clean, healthy and even sweet-smelling lives this close to the bone.

It also takes more time to live like this, slowing many of us down so we can accomplish quite a few humble tasks by hand each day, and leaving little or no space for extra trips to town. After a while, time spent with housemates and neighbors and special friends rates much higher than most entertainment or distractions, on or off the land, and shared attention to the features of our environment—birdsong, squirrel tumble, lush tree branches dancing in the wind—finds a way to the top of many of our priority lists. Sleep cycles adjust to the solar clock, too, and it's been getting rare to see a light on in a living space too long after dark. Whether we're

growing food, tending animals, or just appreciating the wonder that Nature abounds with every day, we trade some of the comforts and assistance of "town life" for the ease of a slower pace, a more grounded daily routine.

Being completely off the grid for many of us weds us intimately with the weather (and is also a blessed automatic preventer of street lights!). At my house, where I receive power from 1000 watts of photovoltaic panels charged by the sun, feeding four excellent (but industrially polluted) batteries, I am backed up several hours a day by a 12-amp charge from the small micro-hydro system below our hillside, shared with my neighbors in this pod and the pod on the other side of the creek. This is one of the small, special tech wonders that make life so much better for some of us—but not all. Some folks depend more on bigger systems, one pod has a solar microgrid, and occasional generator use is essential in many areas when the weather doesn't provide. And, of course, some folks prefer the simplest of lifestyles and come down to the Village Center to use the internet or other electrically run services, backed up there as well by our original (and even more abundant) micro-hydro station.

## Adjusting to Community Changes

The thing I miss the most about life in earlier years at Earthaven is all the meeting we did, whether socially, intellectually, or administratively, as a whole group. Ironically, if our member numbers were still that small, we wouldn't be considered this successful! These days, except for special occasions (which can be administrative, celebratory, or grief-laden) and the weekly potluck, the only formal such gathering is the twice-monthly Council meeting, which has its own set of differences that make me pine for the early days. I have to continually remind myself (or be reminded) that we are almost 30 years old and several generations of official role-takers have had to reinterpret and administer our agreements according to their best understanding of what they're supposed to be for and about. Many subtleties

can get lost in the translations, and yet I don't think any founder would be unable to recognize what's going on if they were to return to a meeting now.

Halfway through our almost three decades of growth and development, our community underwent a painful disjointed rupture in the way we had been doing things, according to our many consensus agreements. The process involved some acutely harmed relationships, a few years of confusion, disruption, and worry, and a huge expenditure of badly needed capital into the grossly overpriced lawyerly grid. In the end, we recreated our one-size-fits-all community into a confabulation of neighborhoods organized in 10-to-12 acre parcels as "housing co-ops," LLCs (limited liability corporations), and one nonprofit. It has taken several years of adjusting to this federation of Earthaven pods to find our way back to some of our original values and practices.

One change that did happen but hasn't actually altered the way we make community decisions was the simultaneous agreement to go from a complete full consensus model to an 85 percent majority rule (which, by the way, we have never used). We still practice the formal consensus model, with stand-asides and stand-in-the-ways, but those who fear gridlock from full consensus can now cooperate with a more relaxed mindset, knowing we can, if we must, turn to a vote if our "solution-oriented meetings" don't provide us with another way to address our differences.

This new pod arrangement, which follows the already disparate topography of our land area, has resulted so far in one packed neighborhood, several that are filling up, and a few that are just beginning to develop. Pod members have legal requirements they need to connect about, as well as common areas to pro-

tect or utilize, and some are finding it sweeter to get closer and more cozy with one another rather than always reaching across the landscape for social satisfaction.

Another big change not evident to the newcomer is the presence of so many children (about one-quarter of the population now, including teens), plus a couple of babes in arms. We founders were wary about encouraging families to join us early on, given how much attention parents would not be able to give the huge list of things we needed to do to get off the map and into the landscape. Of course, some intrepid couples with a small child did push through and worked it out rather well, many of them becoming key to our physical and communal development. But it wasn't until a decade or so into the project that some of the young couples that joined in the early years began to create their families. Those kids and the ones who came as toddlers with their newly joining parents now know this land and its inhabitants better than many of us adults do.

The influence of the Nonviolent Communication philosophy and practice on so many residents has also created an impressively loving, caring, and resilient bunch of youngsters who learn how to handle their interpersonal dynamics with amazing skill early on, at this point more from each other than their caregivers. It is also exciting that after several years of a well-organized "forest children" homeschool program that helped our kids develop intellectual self-respect as well as many creative talents, a large number jumped into enrollment at the new Montessori school only about eight miles down our country road. They get to meet and interact with peers they might not have other ways to know, their parents get more time freed up for work and other projects, and our resident childhood educators get a chance to regroup, skill up, and (perhaps) design ways to either call some of those kids back home or (even more promising) focus on the little ones coming up who may be too young for "export" or just better suited to a few years in more intimate relationship with the landscape and their pod neighbors.

### Finding Equanimity

While I still miss the "old days" in many ways, the freedom I've gained in recent years to do more of what brings joy, to worry less, and keep the creativity alive has been such a blessing. I know I have an extremely critical mind, one that has benefited me and my projects greatly; often if not always it has allowed me to see the missing piece, the beckoning opportunity, the impending danger. It has





also prevented me from enjoying life the way a lot of other folks seem to do. I am finding that its value to my own and my community's needs and operations is often unnecessary or at least less welcome than it once was.

Feeling less needed or appreciated may actually be a blessing, giving me the rest of my life to make the creative and meditative commitments I believe still need my attention. So now I take a few steps back when I read minutes of a task team or administrative guild. So what if things go that way instead of where I would have sent them? From a back seat, I get a better view, not unlike the one visitors see, of how well Earthaven functions, how tuned-in and well-connected its members are, how sincerely they take the responsibilities established for them by our founders and the ministrations of scores of participants. Despite all my doubts, all the times of worry and woe,

we are still essentially walking the talk we began in those etherically blessed circles in which we sat, dreamed, and danced, week after week, sometimes day after day, in those early, blessed years of our ecovillage adventure.

I know ours is not the only community that has tumbled and toppled through rifts and adjustments that came close to rending its basic fabric, and mine is not the only story I've read in *COMMUNITIES* about regrouping and redefining things. Our Earthaven experience was probably even mild (except for the emotions involved) compared to some of those stories. So my heart goes out to others living through the changes in community our quicksilver cultures engender for us, including Anton Marks, who wrote, after attending a communal studies conference: "So what haunts me so much from the stories that I'm hearing? These stories, old and new, describe communities that over time become less and less radical, more and more like the surrounding society. How can we prevent the same processes happening to us?"<sup>1</sup>

I hope we can all become more transparent and translucent in how we manage to survive, recapture our dreams and essence, and present to the future these models of true connection and commitment. 🍌

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*Arjuna da Silva was among the team of intrepid cultural revolutionaries who started Earthaven Ecovillage in 1994 and the educational nonprofit, Culture's Edge, in 1996. Her semi-professional life included many forms of psychotherapy and group counseling, and six years as the publisher and editor of New Florida magazine, but her passion for transformative community has used most of the last three decades in the unfolding Earthaven experience.*

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1. "Will It Happen to Us?," *COMMUNITIES* #197, pp. 8-9.







Bradford Smith

# Community Decarbonization in Ecovillage at Ithaca

*By Caitlin Cameron*

Going back to the 1980s and 1990s, you could find commercials disparaging electric heat pumps as inefficient, expensive energy hogs in comparison to natural gas. Gas stovetops have long been considered the epitome of culinary prowess—the only choice for professional chefs, restaurants, and home-based culinary types. So when the first two neighborhoods in my ecovillage community were being designed in the mid-'90s and early 2000s, natural gas was perceived as a responsible choice. At the time, the electricity grid was not sourced by renewable energy such as solar, hydro, or wind power. So in the name of lower costs and higher efficiency, homes in Ecovillage at Ithaca were designed with natural gas furnaces, radiant heat floors, and, in some cases, gas cooking and heating stoves. We are distinct, however, in that we share these systems using energy clusters—several homes are ganged up and connected to a centralized utility center allowing for both economic and energy efficiency.

Fast forward 30 years and not surprisingly, our understanding of electricity versus natural gas has shifted. The impacts of climate change begin to creep into our lives in upstate New York, most recently with the astoundingly eerie, hazy days when Canadian wildfires brought record air quality alerts never experi-

enced before. The call for decarbonization has become pressing, if not paramount for many communities. Decarbonization refers to an entity shifting systems—energy, food, transportation, etc.—off of fossil fuels in order to reduce or eliminate the carbon footprint associated with its activities.

It is worth noting that even today, building all-electric does not necessarily mean building sustainably. This will vary between communities depending on the energy sources for the electric grid in that location. I am proud to say that New York State has reliable alternative energy sources for its electricity, with recent legislation requiring power generation to be decarbonized by a date-certain.

In March 2023, I find myself sitting with a group of people in the living room of one of our common houses. A few things are notable about this scene. Because all of our buildings are required to have a southern orientation and take advantage of passive solar design principles, we are able to meet midday without having to turn on any lights, relying solely on the late winter sun passing low on the horizon through the abundant south-facing windows. In the FRoG neighborhood where I live (FRoG stands for First Residential Group), the buildings were designed not only with the large area of southern fenestration,



but also with the charming feature of trellises that host grape or wisteria vines. This is an old technique that effectively gives living shade for the houses in the summer and alternatively, allows light and heat to penetrate into our spaces in the winter when the plants have died back. This meeting is also notable for the fact that it is in-person—almost a novelty in the Covid pandemic era. In what might be considered a quaint notion, our buildings also include operable windows, ceiling fans, and cross-ventilation so rooms can have some natural air flow which eases the minds of the meeting attendees who might be conscious of viral health.

Ecovillage at Ithaca, founded in 1991, now includes three neighborhoods. In addition to our passive solar requirement, buildings are designed to have small footprints and be densely clustered (conserving land, energy, and promoting social interaction), and with some variation based on the best materials and methods available at the time of construction, each home has thick, highly insulated walls, and tight building envelopes. The third neighborhood, TREE (Third Residential Ecovillage Experience), was completed in 2015 and, having learned from the example of the previous two neighborhoods, uses Passive House and all-electric building design methodologies, including solar electricity and hot water on the roofs. A handful of these homes are also net-zero, meaning they produce as much energy as they consume. Even within our own community, our understanding and implementation of responsible building practices have evolved with experience.

These techniques—passive solar, exterior shading, natural air flow, highly efficient wall construction, small homes—require no produced energy. In fact, none of the 100 homes at Ecovillage were built with air conditioning. This is the way we humans used to build for centuries before the revolution of steel and glass construction and the advent of mechanical heating

and cooling systems. Hundreds of people visit our community each year to learn from our example; one of our founding goals was to demonstrate that the technology, engineering, know-how, and societal demand exist for the successful establishment of environmentally and socially responsible communities. And though we pride ourselves on many of the things we do well, our community is also adapting and evolving, as our understanding of the world and how we fit into it changes over time.

The meeting I am attending is the convening of a decarbonization task force for the FRoG neighborhood. Almost a year prior, some neighborhood leaders asked the question, “What would it take to get our neighborhood off of fossil fuels?” With the assistance of one of our residents who works in the energy sector, our community took the first step to addressing this question and applied for a grant from NYSERDA (New York State Energy Research and Development Authority) to do a six-month Decarbonization Feasibility Study. The grant allows us to hire a consultant firm with expertise in energy systems to assist us with assessing our current energy use, the status of the existing systems, and whether things like ductwork or air handlers can be reused. We study scenarios that replace the heat and hot water with heat pump systems, but also are interested in what it would take to add cooling to our systems. We’ve noticed over recent years the increased number and temperature of hot days in the summer—sometimes too extreme to be handled by our natural systems for keeping buildings cool.

The scenarios consider both geothermal and air-sourced heat pumps; in either case, we will need to increase our solar fields and energy storage onsite to complete the loop of decarbonization. Our ecovillage is fortunate to have 170 acres of land, which gives us some choices for locating these systems. And although our primary aim is to be proactive about our own use of fossil fuels, we received this grant from NYSERDA, in part,

*Ecovillage at Ithaca community solar array.*



Frank Muller



Frank Müller

to serve as a pilot project to demonstrate the process for this kind of retrofit at a neighborhood or district scale.

Getting our homes off fossil fuels is not the only step to decarbonization. There are several avenues left to tackle—energy, food, transportation, consumerism—that even we, as an intentional community with a sustainability mission, cannot claim to have perfected. But it feels like an important step as buildings (heating, cooling, and cooking) contribute up to 12 percent of carbon emissions in this country through fossil fuel use—and that is not accounting for the electricity use (some attribute 30-40 percent of greenhouse gas emissions to the built environment).

As the summer concludes, so too does our Decarbonization Feasibility Study—the consultants will present us with a few scenarios to consider as a community. Not only will we weigh the different fossil-free technology choices for heating and cooling, the needs around and siting of solar fields for the increased electricity load, but also how to accomplish such a feat without completely disrupting 30 households' lives. And of course, we wait with anticipation to hear the cost estimates and suggestions for how to fund the whole thing.

On the summer solstice of June, the creeping grapevines stretch across that trellis above my south windows, providing that promised summer shade and allowing me to avoid conditioned air for home cooling. A pair of robins built a nest under its cover in the springtime, thinking they would be safe out of reach and shielded by the broad leaves and stockade of trellis and vines. This particular morning, a small drama is playing out as a squirrel climbs the drain pipe to the trellis and violates the sanctity of the nesting place. The adult robins create a flurry of noise and flight, pecking the intruder if it gets too close to the two hatched babies. The parents are relentless in

their vigilance; their protective instincts and stamina impress me, and even other birds arrive at the scene to see what is taking place and contribute to the fight. After some time, the squirrel gives up and vacates the area. Later that day, I look up at the nest searching for the two little beaky heads of the baby robins. Seeing none, I wonder what happened to them, thinking the worst. But after a few minutes, I am surprised to see the two smaller fledglings practicing flight for the first time in my backyard in a tenuous but apparent state of survival. Whether they were ready or not, they were pushed from the nest into the next step of life by their circumstances.

What remains to be seen in this decarbonization process? How to convince 30 households to make a decision *together* to adapt to a future in which climate responsibility is imperative. Like the baby robins forced from their refuge by the imminent threat, I wonder what it will take to nudge my community out of its comfort zone and move forward. The next chapter of our collective climate liberation saga awaits. 🌿

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*Caitlin Cameron joined Ecovillage at Ithaca in 2022 as Project Director for Thrive—the community's education and outreach arm. Originally from Carmel, Indiana (the roundabout capital of the world), she has a background in architecture and city planning and has also lived and worked in Ithaca, San Francisco, Boston, and Portland, Maine. Caitlin's experience and interests include creative placemaking, smart growth, food systems, public art and memory, design policy, and sustainable design and development. She studied architecture at Cornell University, has a Masters in City Planning from MIT, and is a Certified Forest Therapy Guide through the Association for Nature and Forest Therapy. See [ecovillageithaca.org](http://ecovillageithaca.org).*



# Covid Comes to The Farm

By Michael Traugot

**Author's Note:** *In writing this article I am not representing the Farm Community, nor the Farm Board of Directors (BOD) or Membership Committee (MC). This is entirely my personal take on the coming of Covid to The Farm and how we are handling it.*

Since our founding in 1971, The Farm has always been to some extent a microcosm of the macrocosm, despite our initial desire to define ourselves as separate from and counter to the prevailing cultural and economic paradigm. In a world ever more unified by instant global communication and rapid global transit, you can't entirely hide from the larger culture, the general zeitgeist, the group mind, or as we used to say it, the "group head." What's happening somewhere is happening everywhere. True to form, in the case of Covid we had our own version of anti-vaxxers and folks who resisted wearing a mask and practicing social distancing.

Right from the start, when nobody really knew how serious the disease would be, and when vaccines were just a hope for the future, most of us in the community did not want to get Covid. We wanted to practice masking and social distancing. But a small but dynamic and articulate group, mostly from our second generation and a few folks newer to the community, decided they wanted to ignore these constraints in favor of socializing in larger groups they called "pods." "Bring it on," they said, speaking of Covid. "It's just another flu." They hung out in groups as large as 40, and were going into town, into shops and restaurants, unmasked, coming back into the community and circulating in that large pod. (Many people in our part of Tennessee resisted wearing masks.)

This perceived laxness came as a shock to many of us original members, who had lived through the polio epidemics of the 1950s and felt we were saved by vaccines. We knew vaccines had eradicated diseases like smallpox and diphtheria that had plagued our ancestors. We thought the behavior of this large pod, which included friends who did not live on The Farm, was reckless. To many of us it resembled those crazy super-spreader frat parties we were seeing in the media...people almost trying to get Covid on purpose. Most of us did not want to bring it into the community (though it was probably inevitable), or wanted to delay it as long as possible, both to give vac-

cines time to be developed and to avoid the rush on the medical facilities.

To be clear, most of the time most of the more rebellious folks would not get up close to any of us on purpose without a mask. They respected our personal space at that level. Nonviolence is a spiritual practice at The Farm. But their underlying cynicism about taking seriously the disease and the masks and distancing undermined our efforts to act in a unified fashion to control the spread of the disease. Some did not want to admit if they had Covid, considering it private and personal information, even though tracking and isolation were the bedrock of slowing down the disease. A leader of the non-vaccinating group said to me very clearly, "We have a fundamentally different understanding of the disease." To our mind, this was a serious disease to be avoided. She said she would rather just get it and get it over with. Another member of that group admitted he sought it out, or at least dared it to come get him, and said he'd "whip any new strains of the virus" as well (he had recovered from his initial case).

The community question then became their behavior in their freely circulating pod. Pod members assured us that they were being careful around us and would not expose anyone outside their pod, but of course there was no way to be sure of that, especially given the closeness of interaction we are used to in the community. "Human error" is always a factor. The original Covid morphed into the much more serious and contagious Delta, local medical facilities were being overwhelmed, front line medical workers were dying of the disease, people were dying in hospitals isolated from their loved ones, refrigerator trucks were hired as temporary morgues. Case and death counts were high in our area, and we had several cases in the community, some directly traceable to people being lax about masking and not reporting when they had symptoms.



Some of these non-vaccinating folks were scared that we were on a “slippery slope” which would result in mandatory vaccinations for everyone. Big Government and Big Pharma are for some the devil, the enemy. I know there is plenty of reason to be at least skeptical of both, and to be very watchful, but to disregard anything coming from the government or the Centers for Disease Control simply because it comes from them seems to me to be self-defeating and highly dysfunctional. We need to evaluate all the information, eliminating ideology as much as possible from our considerations.

### Generational Conflicts

These differences in perspective about Covid dovetailed with more universal generational conflicts about how things are to be done as each new generation matures into full adulthood, raising their own families and manifesting their own lives.

The Farm population at that time was just above 200, consisting of about 90 folks 65 and older, about 60 folks 18-64 (mostly in the middle portions of that spread), and about 30 minor children, plus some family visitors and short-term guests. Thus it was predominantly an elder community, composed largely of veterans who had devoted up to 50 years of their lives to the community. The rhetoric got pretty intense (for us pacifists) at times, with many expressions of youthful vigor and a sense of invincibility. We were told we were just “old and afraid,” that young people weren’t afraid of Covid, so rather than restricting their freedom of movement we should look after ourselves and avoid them, stay out of their way and protect ourselves, essentially giving up control of our own space so the younger folks could have more freedom of movement. “You choose isolation; we choose connection.” “You choose fear; we choose love.”

While members of the large pod were partying around fires, many of us veterans were “choosing connection” by having dinners in small groups, outdoors and sitting 10 feet apart where we could still hear each other and didn’t have to wear masks. The suggestion that we were “choosing isolation” did not go over well

with us. One “1.5 gen” (“Gen X”) person (who had been a child on the Caravan) suggested that an ideal scenario for dealing with pandemics would be to sequester all the elders and let the younger folks circulate freely and all contract the disease, developing herd immunity, and then the elders would be safe. This of course made no sense. The virus would still be around and the elders would be still be vulnerable. Some of the ideas they were putting out seemed to us to be just plain wrong. “Vaccines don’t work.” “Masks are useless.” One member of the non-vaccinated group actually went around with a small refrigerator magnet, placing it over the vaccination marks of those who had been vaccinated to see if, as some suspected, vaccination was being used to slip magnetic identification chips into people’s arms.

Members of the non-vaccinating group complained that they were being “singled out,” being “othered,” being discriminated against. At public meetings a few of them compared themselves to the Jews in Germany or the Blacks in the Jim Crow South. At least one person displayed one of those bumper stickers proclaiming “I’m not vaccinated” and featuring a yellow Star of David, the marker that Nazis forced Jews to wear in Europe. This was not well received by the Jewish population of The Farm (and many others). It was soon taken down.

The separation that Covid imposed on us made it more difficult for all of us to get together and celebrate, which has been our lifeblood. We have always been really strong on group celebration, especially with music. The Farm Band toured with Stephen and performed at many Farm celebrations. There were several other adult bands, and the community spawned many child and teenage bands.<sup>1</sup> Rock’n’roll music was part of the curriculum at the Farm School. We all regularly danced together, hugged each other, shared food and passed joints, a ceremonial way of asserting our togetherness. Covid made a lot of this impossible. Thus much of the discussion and argument around Covid took place on our online Discussion List, with the inevitable pitfalls of that print medium that tends to exacerbate disagreements better handled in person.

As a community, we were resilient, we were innovative. We held our business meetings outdoors when possible, seated in a large circle 10 feet apart from each other, wiping the microphone after each person spoke. We had a couple of movie nights using an outdoor screen, with similar seating arrangements. One second-generation family kept the connections going by hosting a series of outdoor cafes, preparing the food indoors in the Community Center kitchen, fully masked, and serving outdoors at separate tables. But there was definitely a philosophical separation between folks who hung around in a large unmasked pod and most of the rest of us, and the feelings that went along with that. Needless to point out, very similar separations were happening all over the country/world, often in much more extreme form.



Photos by Albert Bates



## Vaccines and Variants

After about a year (late 2020 into 2021) the vaccines started to become available, and the virus kept morphing. There were several Covid cases in the community, of varying severity. Folks in the large pod were insisting that their particular pod had not infected anyone else outside their group. Those of us who were more educated in science knew that it was impossible to know if they had infected anyone else, since many cases were asymptomatic but could still transmit the virus. And even if technically their suppositions were correct, that was a particular case and was not a large enough sample to prove that it would not happen tomorrow if that behavior continued. Worst was being casual in town risking bringing the virus back into the community.

Although many of us wished everyone would just go ahead and get vaccinated, the fact is we were not gonna force anyone to get vaccinated, and had no control over those who were already members and chose not to vaccinate. Following the early commune/ashram days, the community had tried to have as few rules as possible, nonviolence and conservation of the environment remaining as the bedrock agreements. (There were spirited debates over whether individual trees could be cut.) Now you could eat whatever you wanted, drink whatever you wanted, smoke whatever you wanted, express gender any way you wanted, and your personal business was your personal business unless there was evidence of abuse. But now we had to deal with a new question: Where do you draw the line, how do you find a balance, between personal freedom and public health?

The Farm is blessed with wide spaces, making social distancing relatively easy under normal daily circumstances. But there are important shared spaces—the Welcome Center, the Farm Store, the Community Center, the School, the Swimming Hole—and these became disputed spaces. “You (the community) don’t have the authority to tell me I can’t go down and use the swimming hole when I want to, and I don’t have to wear a mask!” This was the cry of several of the anti-vaxxers, some of whom were not even members. Some of the senior members who would have liked to swim simply stayed away because of this. At one point the argument got so intense the swimming hole was drained for a while. One of the leaders of the anti-vax contingent, a second-generation member born and raised in the community, told me that “many of the best, most anti-establishment people who want to live here are not going to get vaccinated.”

To me, this was a problem. It was OK, in fact fine, to be “anti-establishment,” to “question authority,” but some of these folks seemed to come in with a chip on their shoulders and immediately portray the community leadership and processes as “the establishment.” We constantly heard refrains that The Farm had “lost our spirituality”

because we did not agree with their more anarchistic approach.

The community over time has been unwilling to give a lot of power to the governing committees to make important decisions that affect the whole community. Any change or new policy needs to be approved by vote of the community. Any expenditure over \$7500 must be approved by a vote of the community. When a few of us appealed to the Board of Directors to make a statement of policy on vaccination, masking, and such, they were reluctant to do so. One BOD member, a second-generation person, told me she was “thrilled” that the new residents moving in next to her were vaccinated, and she wished everyone would get vaccinated, but she was firmly against making any kind of rule or “mandate” about it. The Membership Committee (MC) on which I served was also not united enough about this to adopt a working policy on whether to admit more unvaccinated or non-vaccinating residents into the community. One long-time fully vaccinated first-generation Board member said to me, “We (the BOD) are not going to do this (take a stance on vaccination) unless you make us (through the petition process).”

## Petitions and Policies

The real political power on The Farm lies with the members as a whole and manifests through the petition process. Any 15 percent of the members can sign on to a petition to make a proposal on an issue, and the BOD or MC must then hold a public meeting, and then a vote, on the proposal. Not wanting to force anyone to get vaccinated, and not having any control over people already residents, some of us came up with the following proposal in November of 2021:

In consideration of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the need for Public Health measures to protect the vulnerable and the elderly, we, the undersigned Members of the Farm Community, request a community meeting and a community vote on the following proposition:

**“For a period of six months following the adoption of this proposal, all**



**new applicants for residency in the Farm Community will be required to be fully vaccinated for Covid-19. After six months the policy will be reviewed and either renewed or altered.”**

Answer Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Our intention is that this time period be used for open dialogue and for reaching agreements about behaviors we as a community will practice in order to reduce the spread of this disease and to protect those at greatest risk, while still supporting activities vital to the health of individuals as well as the community as a whole.

Once this petition became public, other members came up with the following counter proposal:

***“I affirm each individual’s right to make medical decisions for themselves and their family members. I affirm this ability to choose shall be extended to members, residents, potential residents and visitors. I am in favor of bodily autonomy and support The Farm making recommendations for vaccines instead of mandating vaccination for new or current residents, visitors and guests.”***

To many of us, this seemed like a dangerous proposition. Given the current world situation, a warming planet and an increasing human population in ever-closer proximity to each other and to animal hosts of various viruses and bacteria, which are in turn constantly morphing, it seemed almost inevitable that more pandemics would be coming our way. If we passed this proposal, we would be unilaterally disarming ourselves in advance, giving up an important way of preventing or slowing down Covid or any other disease from circulating in the community. The prospect of many non-vaxxers joining the community and tipping the balance in that direction was scary. If the “pod” were to be 80 people, or even 60 instead of 40, it would be a markedly different community.

Essentially this approach said that personal freedom of choice trumped any other considerations when it came



to who can come in and join our community, extending this “right” to “potential” members who might not even currently know The Farm exists, over the objections of current members whose lives center around living here now. Joining our community is not like simply moving into a town and renting or buying a house. The Farm is in many ways an extended family, and we depend on much mutual contact with each other to keep our spiritual and material existence together. Most of us did not want to become an openly anti-vax or anarchistic community. The Farm is already very attractive to people seeking a more community- and service-oriented lifestyle than you can find in most of mainstream America, and we did not want “no vaccine requirement” to become one of the attractants.

## **Bodily Autonomy**

The non-vaxxing group started calling themselves the “bodily autonomy” group, assuming that title as though the majority, the rest of us, were somehow opposed to bodily autonomy. Almost everyone on The Farm is totally in favor of the right of women to control their own reproductive lives, including contraception and abortion, plus our generation of Farmies pioneered the right for women to control their own birthing processes, not to mention the personal right for everyone to access cannabis at our own choice (we went as far as the US Supreme Court on this one), so this seemed like a dubious claim at best.

Plus it seemed to indicate a fundamental misunderstanding of the meaning of “personal choice.” There is no such thing as absolute freedom of choice in life. Any time you have two people in one place, there is going to be “politics” involved. “Do we turn left at this corner (fork in the path) or right?” “What shall we have for dinner?” “Should we have sex now, later, or never?” We humans are hardwired to coexist in groups. Our survival as individuals depends on our ability to get along with each other, so there is no way anyone is going to have total personal “freedom of choice,” unless you are like Tom Hanks in *Castaway*, alone on an island with only a soccer ball to talk to, which will not give you any back talk.

Our concept of “bodily autonomy” includes the right not to be unnecessarily exposed by others to a potentially deadly disease we do not want to contract. The “street talk” equivalent of this would be, “Your freedom stops where my nose begins.” These discussions tap into very basic visceral human issues.

Another assumption was that we, the elder majority, were opposed to “alternative medicine” because we believed in vaccines and masking. This too was a dubious claim, considering that we pioneered and championed anesthetic-free home birth. Many or most of us consider “natural” diet and exercise to be fundamental to good health, use





various herbs for various applications, and are open to, and often searching for, health aids that are outside currently conventional medical practice. We believe in the healing qualities of massage and other bodywork, and of all sorts of “vibrational” healing, cognitive therapy, rituals and such. But we also recognize the value of standard American medicine. One of the reasons the Farm midwives have had such a stellar record of healthy outcomes is because they are good at screening, at knowing just when it is time to give up the home birth attempt and head for the hospital. Lives have been saved in this way.

Another aspect that seemed disturbing to myself and many of my friends was the similarity of rhetoric between our own “bodily autonomy” contingent and the rhetoric of the right-wing, anti-government MAGA folks threatening the democratic process in many parts of the country, and our group’s apparent lack of appreciation of this similarity. While some of our own group of nonviolent peaceful “alternative” hippies were claiming to represent “bodily autonomy,” members of the so-called “Wolverine Watchmen,” an armed militia group in Michigan, were plotting to kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer and potentially kill her and other state officials over her “tyrannical” Covid restrictions. “Bodily autonomy” was one of their rallying cries. Their plan, of course, totally disregarded Gov Whitmer’s own “bodily autonomy,” as well as that of anyone who would have stood in the way of their plot. Three of the co-conspirators were given lengthy prison terms, one expressing regret and a “lapse of judgment” that allowed him to become swept away in the anti-government movement, and another saying, “I regret that I ever allowed hate, anger and fear into my heart.”<sup>2</sup>

After a very intense outdoor meeting in late December 2021, we voted in January 2022. The first proposal, a moratorium on new unvaccinated residents while we tried to come up with a community protocol on behavior during pandemics, passed 74-27. The second proposal, to only recommend but not require new incoming residents to be vaccinated, received only 23 votes. Many of us were relieved.

## A Truce on Public Health

Once the vote demonstrated materially the strength of the sentiment toward prioritizing public health, and the rebellious group realized just how much they were in the minority, the heated rhetoric subsided and most everyone was on their best behavior. It seemed obvious that a large majority of the community wanted The Farm to be a “mostly vaccinated and very careful” community. This was January 2022. Since then there has been a de facto truce, and everyone has been treating each other with respect.

During the summer and fall of 2022 cases of Covid had waned, and most of us did

not mask; we hugged, and for the most part acted pretty much like “normal,” or what used to be normal. But the question of if or when non-vaccinated folks would be allowed in as residents continued to hang over the community. There had been no vote on any official policy change, so vaccinated folks continued to be admitted but not unvaccinated folks.

Meanwhile Covid had continued to evolve, getting around vaccinations, which had not prevented infection or transmission, but continued to prevent much more serious cases, hospitalizations, and deaths. Toward Christmas another wave of cases came through Tennessee. After the annual Farm Christmas Bazaar at the Community Center/School, several new cases erupted, including my own and my wife’s. Most of us had not been masking, and distancing at events like this is difficult, with hundreds of people walking up to craft booths or food servers and directly interacting.

As of 2023 almost everyone in the community has either been vaccinated and boosted, and/or had Covid, so there is a lot of immunity in the group. At this point it might seem that the question of vaccination versus not vaccination for Covid is moot (although medically it is still a serious disease), since currently even vaccinated folks can catch the disease and transmit it.

But when the next virus or other pathogen comes around, are we going to have the same fight again? Or are we going to be prepared to act as a team and delay the progress of the disease through our community? Remember, Covid, for all its death and destruction, has been relatively mild compared to what it could have been. Some of the other coronaviruses, as well as other viruses and bacteria, can be much more serious. Polio, for example, was both contagious and attacked children. Same for diphtheria (my Dad lost a little sister in the 1920s to diphtheria).

## The Vote on the Non-Proposal

On June 2, 2023, Farm members voted on a proposal, or *not* a proposal. The Membership Committee had come up with guidance for dealing with future public health questions, explained to the

community as follows:

We are a rare and precious community, based on trust, love, respect, honesty, caring, and truthfulness.

This document proposes that in the event of another serious emergent infection, such as Covid-19, that the BOD be able to institute measures to try to decrease the spread of such disease, based on the best evidence-based understanding of the disease at that time. These BOD measures would only apply to serious, communicable, infectious diseases, where the actions and behavior of one individual may impact the health of other individuals.

The aim of having a plan to allow the BOD to institute mitigation measures is to protect the health of our community.

**“The requirement to be vaccinated for Covid will be lifted and in the event of an outbreak of serious contagious disease, we will attempt to follow public health guidelines from BOD whose guidelines will be based on the best scientific evidence available at the time.”**

Answer Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

This proposal tried to thread the needle between personal choice and public health, and presented it as an exchange: the community agrees to admit folks who choose to be unvaccinated in exchange for a promise from those folks, and from all residents, to prioritize public health and go along with mitigation measures when necessary. It was stated in the mildest possible way, even using the word “attempt” instead of a stronger word, like “pledge,” or simply saying “residents will be required to...,” acknowledging that there might be differences in folks’ ability or willingness to follow some guidelines. The proposal was basically asking for cooperation. If you’re gonna choose to decline vaccination and live in this community, you may be asked to follow public health protocols if necessary, so please cooperate.

The BOD has the final say on proposals for a vote, and they rejected the MC proposal. They wanted a simple up/down

vote on either extending the current vaccination requirement or ending it. That is what the BOD let us vote on:

### Membership Committee Policy Change

Needs a *majority vote* to be ratified.

The following policy was approved by a community vote in January 2021: **“For a period of six months following the adoption of this proposal, The Farm Community will only accept new applications for residency from candidates who are fully vaccinated for Covid-19. After six months this policy will be reviewed and either renewed or altered.”**

Do you wish to renew this policy? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Some of their logic was they wanted to keep it clean and simple. Since the policy had been formally voted in by the community, it needed to be formally voted out. But this was also de facto a decision to NOT have a formal public health policy at this time, since the existing Covid policy was obviously obsolete and was going to be voted out. The BOD told the MC and the community that in order to have something as significant as a formal public health policy we needed to start with a petition and a meeting, and then have a vote. The impetus had to come from the community in general, and the process had to start over again. There is very little chance that this will happen; everyone is so tired of Covid that they just want to move on.

In the end, the impulse against having a rule won out over a more formal approach to pandemics. The vaccination requirement for prospective residents was voted out, but 42 people (34 percent) voted to extend the obsoleted requirement, in lieu of having a policy to vote on.

### Back to Square One?

So it may look like we are “back to square one,” without a formal policy to manage potential pandemics, but that would not be entirely true. The same MC member who wrote the appeal for a policy also said that in the end he didn’t think we really needed to pass a policy, that we would get cooperation anyway after all our discussions and arguments about it over the last three years (March 2020-June 2023). We’re all better educated about viruses and pandemics than we were at the beginning, and all more aware of the needs of different groups and demographics within the community, such as the elders’ need to feel protected, the youngers’ need for mobility, the kids’ need to keep going to school, and the general need to continue economic activity. Hopefully





we'll be better prepared for the next one, but that will depend on our level of trust and how well we are communicating at the time.

The BOD did indicate they would like us (MC and Welcoming Center) to make a strong statement to incoming folks, letting them know how we prefer to handle public health here and asking them for their cooperation, a truly strong “ask,” but nonetheless an “ask,” not a “tell.” One veteran BOD member wrote this paragraph, to be presented (or something like it) to all incoming folks who want to spend more than a few days in the community:

**“We support the rights of individuals to make their own health choices, but we’ve always been a community that believes in the shared responsibility of public health. When it comes to communicable diseases and toxic contaminants, we’ve looked to experts in public health, conventional (allopathic) medicine, and other scientific sources for advice. Our board of directors works with these advisors to develop and approve action plans for community members which, whenever possible, will include options for compliance.”**

This is a strong statement, and does reflect the sense that the community really does want to be “very careful,” but ultimately it will be presented and enforced (to the extent that we do that) by MC members on an individual basis, with no formal requirement. This places a lot of responsibility on the individual MC members to question and probe each candidate for residency. Are you vaccinated? What’s your philosophy about vaccination? Would you be a good risk to cooperate in the case of another pandemic coming down the pike? We have to guess whether this person would be a problem in a pandemic situation, based on short exposure to the person. This makes the process really personal, and you can only go so far with this before you wind up putting the person off, making them feel “unwelcome.”

It feels pretty good here right now. The Sanctuary Summit event in April was a huge success, almost exclusively managed by second-generation folks. The Dances of Universal Peace event drew folks from all generations, and the monthly Market Day has been picking up new vendors and customers each time. We just voted in 10 new Full Members, the largest group ever voted in at one time (you need to be affirmed by two-thirds of the membership to become a Full Member). Three are first-generation returnees, three are second-generation returnees, one is a spouse of a second-generation member, and three are new folks who came looking for community. Seven of them are vaccinated, three are not (they were here before the moratorium on unvaccinated folks took place), and their vaccination status did not seem to have any noticeable effect on the vote count. Voter turnout was 96 percent.

It would be nice to wrap up this episode with a clear ending, a neat resolution, but

really there is no ending. We live in a world that is a sea of life forms, and life goes on within us and without us. There will be more novel infectious agents, more climate impacts, and undoubtedly more differing opinions about how to respond. Ultimately how well we handle these challenges will come down to our degree of trust and communication: “trust, love, respect, honesty, caring, and truthfulness.” And this will be true not just in our small intentional community, but in the whole country and the world at large.

In the global village we are all connected. The Earth for all of us is our “rare and precious community,” and our small communities are microcosms of the macrocosm. If we can work through these challenges at the community level, perhaps we can do so at the macro level as well. 🐦

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*Michael Traugot was born in New York City in 1945 and grew up in New Jersey. As an undergraduate at Harvard he was co-chair of the SDS chapter, but, he writes, “when the antiwar movement went violent, I knew we needed a more cultural and spiritual revolution, so I headed west to find it.” In California he found Spirit and Sangha, or “beloved community.” A founding member of The Farm, he lived there from 1971 to 2000, and now again since 2018. He has taught at five different colleges and universities, and currently teaches sociology at Columbia State Community College. He is also an avid lifelong gardener. His most recent previous article in COMMUNITIES is “Kudzu and Consensus” (issue #191).*



1. The original Farm Band played together up till the last few years, and several second-generation Farm musicians perform professionally today in various parts of the country.  
2. [www.nytimes.com/2022/12/15/us/whitmer-kidnap-sentence-michigan.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/15/us/whitmer-kidnap-sentence-michigan.html)

# Adapting to One Another in Community

*By Carolyn North*

I live with five others in a big country home that once was an Inn, set in woods at the bottom of a peaceful village—four older women, one younger man, two dogs, and three cats. We live in adjoining suites, share a large kitchen and dining room, a meeting space and parlor, and we have one suite left; my choice would be another man here, for balance.

The house was originally meant to be a small community for modern mystics—mostly those identifying with Jesus, but not with the Church. As it happens, I almost fit that description—Jewish by culture and mystic by nature—and they invited me in. In fact, I enjoy being a renegade who keeps the others guessing. I wonder if they're aware of how much fun I'm having?

In any case, we are all committed to communal living, sharing the bounty and the work as well as a vision of peace amongst all beings, in a gorgeous setting of woods by a river tucked in a valley at the edge of a country village. The setting could hardly be lovelier, and adapting to a shared lifestyle, for me, feels important.

Adapting to one another, personalities and annoying habits, comfort levels and quirks, not to mention deeper psychological histories, is not so simple. We're humans, after all, with our own stories, agendas, and deep opinions, so of course we're likely to trip over one another in the task of living together—how could it be otherwise? Living in community is like living in a family, but without parents, where the kids set the rules and then tend to break them. At its best, the system is flexible and fair but at its “not-best” it can be a pain in the neck, quite frankly.





Last night it was my night to prepare dinner, so I dreamed up a stir-fry of colorful vegetables with rice and condiments, sausages on the side. While it was cooking, one of my housemates got busy boiling up potatoes, which were not on my planned menu. I sighed with impatience, taking her intrusion as a power play and a comment on my cooking.

"I'm already making supper," I told her as evenly as I could.

"But I want mashed potatoes, too," was her response.

I could hear the muttering in my head...*but I'm making dinner tonight, you spoiled brat, and this is a deliberate insult...why didn't you ask me first?*

For the next two days, we avoided each other like the plague, but this morning I got it that I loom a bit large around here, so I ate mashed-potato fritters for breakfast and offered her one.

I grew up in wartime, when Hitler was in power, in a frightened household of Jewish refugees mourning our best beloved who died on the battlefield, the son who could have knit us all together but disappeared before he could do so. In our house, mourning and anger set the tone, and I threaded my way through keeners and silent faces, trying to be invisible.

Here, I live with people whose backgrounds I've never encountered before: one with six siblings, who grew up learning to talk and move fast; one, the child of a United States Senator; one, an Army brat who grew up on military bases in other countries.

Our adult lives have been equally various with marriages and divorces, good luck and bad, tragedies and triumphs. I love sitting around after dinner and listening to their stories about families I never had, and hard luck tales of events I could never, as a New York Jew, have imagined. I'd love it even better if we had Southern Blacks amongst us; Afghanis; Gujuratis...

Suzanne Simard, in her book *Finding the Mother Tree*, says, "Roots don't thrive when they grow alone. They need one another."

As do we all—but, as a friend once wryly put it to me, "Community is great—the only problem is the other people."

I've been reading lately about mycelial webs in forests, and am astonished to know how discordant the rules of our Western cultures are with the laws of the natural world. Natural law features interdependence, and we celebrate Independence and will kill one another over it. We prize private ownership of the Earth and compete for a natural world that is not ours to own. We value our privacy, and then ingest chemicals to combat our loneliness.

How do we learn to live amongst one another, like trees in a forest connected at the level of the roots?

At our little community here, we are simple friends even though at any other time we might never even have met. And we laugh a lot.

Yesterday, I helped Helen, who is in her 70s, sort out her "too-many clothes" and we spent the afternoon bent over boxes and laughing our heads off. I heard the stories of when she wore that dress, and how she gave birth to six daughters. I told her about my Jewish cousin who was ordained as a priest in Durham Cathedral, and she told me about going to Catholic School as a child. Cautiously, I told her about growing up Jewish during Hitler's time, and then cried in her arms.

Like that, day by day, we get to know one another, as the trees do in the forest, sending out feelers under the ground, meeting up in pockets of soil and tendrilling around one another, inviting a bit of fungal web into the living pocket, feeding it from our own access to the roots of the Mother Tree, helping one another be resilient in a challenging world, investing in one another, assisting one another, sharing the resources and, who knows how mycelia do it, but laughing together and shaking it up, however tiny are the ways, and thriving...together. 🍄

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*Carolyn North lives in a small community in Putney, Vermont, and has three children and four grandchildren. Her husband, Herb Strauss, died in 2015. Her passion is "consciousness change" through the arts, and shaking up whatever needs shaking up in these times of change, and having great fun in the process. She is a dancer, and the author of 16 books of fiction (see [www.carolynnorthbooks.com](http://www.carolynnorthbooks.com)).*



# After the Nuclear Family: Fission, Fusion, Going Green, and La Cafétéria

By Gabrielle Anctil



Photos courtesy of [www.facebook.com/cafeteria4534](https://www.facebook.com/cafeteria4534)

*The following excerpts are translated from French (by Google Translate and Chris Roth) and adapted from pages 11-14 and 53-63 of *Loger à la même adresse: Conjuguer nos forces face à la crise du logement, l'isolement et la pauvreté* (The more we share: Joining forces in the face of the housing crisis, isolation and poverty) by Gabrielle Anctil (XYZ Publishing, Montreal, Quebec, 2023, [editionscopy.com](http://editionscopy.com)).*

## WELCOME TO La Cafétéria

I have lived for 14 years in an intentional community, La Cafétéria, in the Hochelaga-Maisonneuve neighbourhood in Montreal. We share all expenses, including food; we prepare collective suppers twice a week (which are not obligatory to attend) and organize chores every six weeks to clean all the apartments.

I cofounded La Cafétéria in 2008 with two friends. We were in our early 20s and the future still seemed very vague to us. However, we had one certainty: the model that was proposed to us—the nuclear family—did not suit us. We wanted to live in community, forever. We moved into a big three-bedroom apartment together, where the shared spaces were bigger than the bedrooms and where we received an almost incessant stream of visitors.

In 2012, our apartment seemed too small to us. Around us had gathered a large community and we needed more space to flourish. Luckily, we were able to get our hands on a huge five-bedroom apartment in the same neighbourhood, where six

roommates were crammed. As the years passed, we were able to catch apartments that were freeing up in the same building. The ground floor remains our central space, even if we can move freely from one apartment to another.

Today, there are nine of us—young professionals and students—in five apartments and La Cafétéria is entering its teenage years. I have lived most of my adult life in this community.

Environmental considerations, the crumbling of the nuclear family, isolation, the housing crisis...many issues find their solution in a more collective way of life, in which projects such as La Cafétéria participate. Not to mention that more than 80 percent of the Canadian population lives in cities.<sup>1</sup> To face the problems of the future, we must rethink our way of sharing this restricted space, without contributing to urban sprawl.

## Nuclear Winter

“The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake,” reads the cover of *The Atlantic* magazine (February 20, 2020), featuring an article by journalist David Brooks which analyzes this family model in the



United States. His fascinating text traces the history of nuclear families: in the 1950s, extended families and neighbourhoods were still tightly knit, not to mention the women who stayed at home to raise the children. What one imagines as a family with two parents, 2.5 children, and a suburban bungalow was accompanied by a complex support network. Over time, the network has dissolved. Parents today must juggle full-time jobs and increasingly restricted social circles.

“[O]ver the past two generations, families have grown more unequal,” notes Brooks. “Among the highly educated, family patterns are almost as stable as they were in the 1950s; among the less fortunate, family life is often utter chaos. There’s a reason for that divide: Affluent people have the resources to effectively buy extended family, in order to shore themselves up.” He lists the services for which a nuclear family must pay: babysitting, tutoring, psychological help, to which we can add household help or even lunch boxes—in short, all of the needs that the extended family made it possible to meet at a time when people still lived close to each other. He concludes: “for millions of people, the shift from big and/or extended families to detached nuclear families has indeed been a disaster.”<sup>2</sup>

What should replace the nuclear family? The question is not just theoretical. This model, which has dominated for decades, is in the process of crumbling, as analyses of the 2021 Canadian census show. Already in 2012, a fission of the nuclear family was noted: “If the traditional nuclear family is breaking up across Canada, it is clearly in Quebec that the changes are felt most significantly.”<sup>3</sup>

It would seem that the answer, for many people, is single life. In the most recent census, we learned that the fastest growing type of household is made up of single people: “4.4 million people lived alone in 2021, compared to 1.7 million in 1981. These people represented 15 percent of all adults aged 15 and over living in private households in 2021, the highest proportion on record.”<sup>4</sup>

This trend can be explained in several ways: population movements to cities will sometimes separate families—young people from more rural regions who leave to study in a large urban center are an example. Women, who on average live longer than men, sometimes end their days alone as widows or divorcees. It is a choice for some: marriages happen later, when they occur.

More and more women, even young ones, prefer to live alone. They have good motivations: “once women get a taste for living

alone, they are more concerned about doing more than their fair share of chores and caring for others.”<sup>5</sup>

## Alone but Not Alone

I recently got a taste of this way of life. For a little over a year, I lived by myself in a two-bedroom apartment on the third floor of the building occupied by La Cafétéria. I had originally moved there with a roommate, Alain, who decided to leave during the 2020 lockdown. So stuck working from home, I decided to grab the extra room and make it into an office—the room was beautiful and my many plants loved the gorgeous afternoon sun that streamed in through the west-facing window.

Having shared an apartment with roommates for my entire adult life, I quickly understood the appeal of a solo life. I could walk around in panties in the middle of the afternoon without meeting anyone; I could leave my dirty dishes lying around without disturbing anyone; I could come home at any time without fear of waking the household. It’s true that having your own little corner is pleasant.

But I would never have wanted to do that without having the rest of La Cafétéria close at hand. The negative sides of living alone are well known: a person living alone will not be able to count on a partner or roommate to help in the event of a medical problem or to hold a ladder; the quarts of milk will always be far too big for a single person; there will not be space to store a summer bike in a tiny studio.<sup>6</sup> Thanks to my neighbours, I never experienced these problems.

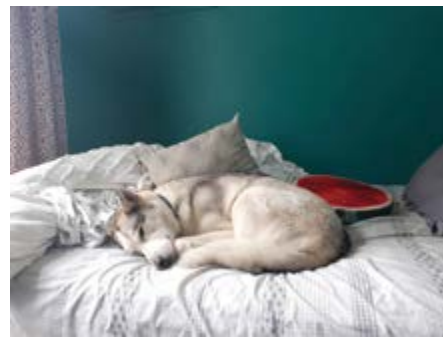
Despite all its advantages, living alone also has an important dark side: it contributes to multiplying our greenhouse gas emissions. “Because of efficiencies of scale, sole-member households can use 50 per cent more energy per person than those living in couple-households, and an aging demographic means thermal performance of homes will be increasingly important since health and wellbeing of seniors partly relies on comfortable room temperatures.”<sup>7</sup>

Is it possible to have it both ways when it comes to housing choice?

## Sharing to Counter Climate Change

The most visible environmental benefit of community life is the sharing of resources. La Cafétéria uses two washing machines for five apartments. We share a handful of small appli-





ances, from blenders to irons. Pooling our belongings allows us to have everything we need, including knowledge, to repair our clothes or a toaster. We buy our food in bulk, reducing packaging waste.

“[A]dding an additional member to a household reduces per capita emissions by about 6%,” noted three American economists.<sup>8</sup> There will likely be an oven and a fridge in every house or apartment, regardless of the number of people who live there. It will also be necessary to heat or cool all these spaces. Spreading the benefits of whatever energy we consume is essential to reducing our impact on the environment.

All this is not theoretical. One study noted that “compared to average households,...intentional communities are more compact with greater population density; have fewer people traveling by car; have more walkers and cyclists, which results in a reduced production of greenhouse gas emissions.”<sup>9</sup>

Resource sharing is a habit. I am sometimes still troubled by the fear of losing control over an object that I have just purchased and which is found in collective use. But...it’s just an object! Fortunately, the majority of the time, sharing has become a habit that even extends beyond the doors of our home. We offer our internet connection to the neighbour, allowing her to reduce her costs. The “street library” made by a former roommate attracts people from the neighbourhood every day who deposit books and various objects there or leave with a new treasure.

“The consumerist imperative that seems endemic to the West

is mitigated in cohousing, particularly with respect to the sharing or gifting of everyday goods, such as food, clothing or books and small appliances.”<sup>10</sup> Once you’ve got into the habit of sharing, it becomes normal to ask around if anyone has what you’re looking for rather than rushing to the store to get it. Obviously, proximity makes this sharing possible: I wouldn’t cross town to use a coffee machine. But the coffee machine on the ground floor, two floors below, is easily accessible. If I go there, I may also meet a roommate with whom to share my breakfast.

My experience proves that it is possible to enjoy the benefits of single life, while combating the negative impact this lifestyle can have on the environment. I’m not the only one who can live like this: the cohousing model, where residents have a private unit in a collectively designed housing development, offers a win-win option. Cheryl Gladu, then a doctoral student at Concordia University specializing in collaborative housing, wrote in *The Conversation* magazine: “One reason this model is interesting is that it shows us that when members of an intentional community band together to create their own neighbourhood, they opt for less personal space and more shared resources.”<sup>11</sup> This finding is particularly interesting news, especially because the general trend is currently the opposite: houses are constantly getting bigger, and with them, environmental harm.<sup>12</sup>

Cheryl Gladu continues: “Despite the fact that most of these communities do not have certified green buildings, research shows us that cohousing communities outperform green buildings in



terms of environmental measures, and this is probably related to the governance structure rather than technological innovation.”<sup>13</sup>

She cites, in support of her remarks, an article analyzing several types of housing in British Columbia. The study reveals that it is in cohousing developments, rather than in buildings that have received LEED ecological status certification, that the people with the greenest behaviors are found. In particular, we discover that the smaller dwellings of cohousing encourage residents to reduce their possessions. But it’s mostly the establishment of a structure simplifying and encouraging recycling, composting, and other ecological practices which guarantees that the environmental impact of the community will be reduced. In short, collective decision-making and community encouragement weigh heavily on our behavior.<sup>14</sup>

Can we live alone while reducing our greenhouse gas emissions? Absolutely. To achieve this, however, we will have to work collectively.

### New Forms of Family

La Caf t ria was founded to offer an alternative to the imperative of forming a couple, which is still particularly strong in our society. “People have bought into the ideology that having someone is better—[that] the more natural, normal, superior way of being is being coupled or having a family,” remarks the author of an article on solo life.<sup>15</sup> Yet, as we have seen, the nuclear family is far from being a viable way of life.

Despite everything, social expectations towards the couple are still strong. There is still an unwritten step-by-step guide to building a relationship that meets society’s expectations. “We all grew up with the idea that the couple relationship was the ultimate romantic ideal, regardless of our gender or our sexuality. This model has stages that are supposed to lead us to marriage, parenthood, property—the so-called ‘relationship escalator,’” reads the description of the first episode of the French podcast *Le Coeur sur la table*, hosted by journalist Victoire Tuaille.<sup>16</sup>

Intentional community living has made me think long and hard about what I’m looking for in a loving relationship. By embarking on a long-term project with people I’m not in love with, I was already upsetting the established scripts. In fact, with experience, I have seen that my relationship with La Caf t ria has many points in common with life as a couple. When I start dating someone, it’s essential that I declare my allegiance to my roommates. Anyone who comes into my life should know that I will always prioritize a commitment to La Caf t ria over a romantic date—and the same goes for my roommates. I have already been told: “Ah well, you just have to miss your meeting!” I always answer with a resounding no. I have attended all community meetings for 14 years. I will not skip one for the beautiful eyes of a suitor!

This situation is not unique to me—on the contrary, it is a rather common experience. We find a version of it in an article in *The Cut*, highlighting a community of eight adults and three children who share a large house in Connecticut:

“The following year, Welch [one of the community members] began dating Simon DeSantis. ‘When it was serious, which was, like, date four,’ DeSantis laughed, ‘she said, “This is how I live and if we’re going to be together, you have to be okay with that.”’ ... He started joining the house for weekly dinners. Getting to know them was more nerve-racking than meeting her parents. ‘I was on my best behavior,’ he says. ‘I thought, *I have to get in good with these people, because I want to live with them.*’”<sup>17</sup>

During the writing of this essay, many things have changed at La Caf t ria. A charming three-bedroom apartment having freed up in a triplex next to the building occupied by the community, we added a fifth apartment to the collective, which I now occupy with my partner, Jasmin.

From the start of our relationship, I was very clear with him: if he ever wanted to live with me, it should be at La Caf t ria. It was a *sine qua non*.






When the opportunity to live together presented itself to us, Jasmin and I discussed at length what this cohabitation would mean for us. Even if they concerned our couple, these conversations always included a third entity: La Caf  t  ria. I was able to see that the habit of prioritizing the well-being of my collective is so ingrained that I sometimes came to neglect that of my partner (I have improved since!). Without my noticing, community life had profoundly changed my way of perceiving life as a couple.

In fact, the choice to build a future that does not place the couple at the center of everything leads to asking fascinating and somewhat dizzying questions: Do I absolutely have to live with my partner to be in a relationship? Should I be in love with the one (or those!) with whom I will have children? How do my friends fit into my plans for the future?<sup>18</sup>

These challenges to the relationship escalator fit into what some describe as “relationship anarchy,” a type of relationship where the only rule is that all constraints must be explicitly discussed and approved by everyone involved—we don’t take anything for granted, even if “everyone does it like that.” Relationship anarchists challenge the idea that one type of relationship

(the couple) should take precedence over all others, including friendships. By prioritizing La Caf  t  ria over a romantic relationship, I am in line with this philosophy. 

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*The article above is adapted from pages 11-14 and 53-63 of Loger    la m  me adresse: Conjuguer nos forces face    la crise du logement, l’isolement et la pauvret   (The more we share: Joining forces in the face of the housing crisis, isolation and poverty) by Gabrielle Anctil (XYZ Publishing, Montreal, Quebec, 2023, [editionsxyz.com](http://editionsxyz.com)).*

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# Adaptation, Community, and Conflict

By Freija Leeuwenburgh

Recently I read *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer, and found every page a pure delight. The author brings together scientific knowledge with indigenous wisdom and the teaching of plants. One sentence particularly stuck with me: “We need acts of restoration, not only for polluted waters and degraded lands, but also for our relationship to the world.”<sup>1</sup> With this phrase, Kimmerer pleads for adaptation in our lifestyle and ultimately our worldview. Living in community goes hand-in-hand with adapting, and I wondered: can the kind of adaptation we learn in community lead to a better relationship between us and the world around us, both human and non-human?

I lived in a cohousing community for three years in Utrecht, the Netherlands. While there, I noticed that we almost never resolved conflicts...because there were practically none to resolve! We were all trying our best to prevent them from happening in the first place. Social conflict is normal in every human setting, and I don't think our aim should be necessarily to prevent conflict at all costs. However, most communities and most human beings I've known prefer to live in peace and harmony—not experiencing too many conflicts, and when those do arise, being capable of resolving them in a constructive and peaceful way. During my time in cohousing, a big reason tensions or disagreements didn't turn into conflicts was that the people concerned were flexible and able to adapt.

Adapting can be easy to do when a situation is light-hearted, but it becomes much harder to be adaptable when your core principles or community values are at stake. I myself can be steadfast when others are asking for something or doing something that doesn't match with my own principles, such as always cleaning after cooking. (I do understand that when it's late and you're tired it's really much more appealing to do it in the morning.) Thinking about this entanglement of adapting and staying true to values, I realised you don't necessarily have to break loose from your or your community's values or ideology. I think striving for adaptability is definitely a good goal but being adaptable is not a synonym for breaking values. I believe humans can be flexible and adaptable in situations of emerging conflict, *whilst* staying true to their community values and ideologies. The question is: how?

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What started as a personal interest flowed into my university thesis topic and after that continued as my interest again: conflict management within intentional communities. Over the last year and a half, I have visited many communities in the Netherlands (my native country) and have met and talked to a great number of inspiring people. Striking to me was that so many sources of conflict were not bound to one community but in fact universal. Reading the COMMUNITIES issue devoted to conflict resolution<sup>2</sup> was only a confirmation that time and place have little influence in why and over what human beings in community settings experience conflict.

Having housemates who hold cleaning standards different from yours; others not being as invested in the shared life as you'd hoped; miscommunications on agreements or after meetings; work expectations based on gender or age...do you recognise any of these? Second-hand, I have experienced all of these and more over the past year. More interestingly, I've also seen how the people involved dealt with these conflicts, often by

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being adaptable.

But before we ask ourselves *how* to be adaptable in a situation of (emerging) conflict, it's important to ask: *who* or *what* exactly needs to be adaptable? Is it merely us, our own behaviour, attitudes, or reactions towards each other? Or is there something else that can change—for example, a part of the domestic protocols or underlying agreements?

I saw a good example of the latter when I spoke to Jeanne during my field work. Jeanne mentioned that her most recent cohousing group of over 50 members had established four pillars which served as principles for the community. She said: “The aim is for members to feel connected through this, but in practice it creates a lot of rigidity.” For Jeanne flexibility in rules, being able as a community to make personal exceptions, would serve the purpose of feeling togetherness and could thus be a way of preventing conflict.

On the other hand, we sometimes need

to adapt ourselves: our behaviour or attitude. An attitude of being less open to other people and their opinions has been a big cause for conflict I've seen in my research. Having an open mind to others and their viewpoints is therefore a great way of preventing conflict. In order to achieve that, we sometimes have to be flexible and adapt our own viewpoints or work methods.

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Most people living in communities I've met stated that within their homes it's normal to work very cooperatively. Working cooperatively or on a common goal helps them learn how to deal with other people's opinions, taking into consideration other people's interests, as well as increasing patience and empathy.

Pablo, living in a community in England, said to me in an online interview: “We work in teams, so we try to avoid someone working alone. When you work as a team, it's not just about getting the job done, but also about being in partnership and in conversation: where we are, what the challenges are, and how we deal with those challenges together. So, the emphasis is not just on the task but on building relationships.”

And Tess, living in a Dutch community, said: “There is greater value in having space for someone else's perspective—and actually listening to it. It increases my tolerance towards people of different life experiences and different ages.”

Tess also stated that living communally has had a positive effect in her work, where she has to manage people from different organisations. Communities like hers in which many have their own individual work, or spend their work hours mostly with people from outside the community, can still create opportunities for the bonding-through-

*Members of the Global Ecovillage Network Netherlands meeting for the 2023 Summer Gathering at Staatje Vrij in Ten Boer, Groningen, The Netherlands.*



Stefan Hoevenaar



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## When a situation or person requires you to adapt, take a step back. It's very important to recognise your first reaction and emotions around this situation.

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work by structuring community tasks to be more cooperative—for example, by making grocery shopping, cleaning, or fixing the house a joint activity. In these moments of working as a collective, people are talking, sharing personal stories, and getting to know one another. This, plus working on the same purpose, often leads to increased tolerance and empathy towards those with different viewpoints, which in turn can prevent conflict.

Sasha told me about the unwritten rule in her household (nine adults and two children) of eating together every Wednesday. According to her, social activities like the sharing of a meal were also a way to prevent conflict from happening, as they contributed to social bonding and accepting each other's perspectives. She said to me: "We know each other well, and that helps a lot. And that's why the eating helps so much. It's a kind of preventive approach, but you don't call it that because it's just having a nice meal together, but that's how it works." Shared meals create the perfect setting to talk casually about everyday things, keeping everyone up to date about everyone else's life circumstances. Empathy towards others increases, and if one member of the community is going through a rough or busy time, it is easier

for the rest to soften frustrations—for example, around this person not carrying out cleaning tasks. It is easier to adapt your opinions or reactions towards your neighbours when you are in connection.

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What about the challenge of adapting whilst staying true to community values or core principles, especially when those tend to get overshadowed? First of all, when a situation or person requires you to adapt, take a step back. It's very important to recognise your first reaction and emotions around this situation. Perhaps get a neutral third person involved to listen to your feelings or concerns. Only in a later phase, you go to action. Here's what "going to action" might look like:

1. Write down in detail your core values, your community's ideology, how you stay true to them in day-to-day life, and why it feels as if you would have to break away from them now to "adapt" to something. This can give you clarity and you might already be able to put things into another perspective. You can do this step of the process on your own or with someone else.

2. Get a clear view on what or who you believe needs to adapt, and why. In case it is someone, or multiple people from your community, you'll have to discuss these questions with them. Also, it is important to discuss their own values and ideologies. Maybe those (partially) match with yours.

3. Go into conversation and find a way together in which the required adaptation can be realised whilst remaining true to everyone's values. Evaluate in this process what the outcome of the situation will look like. Will the situation be improved in comparison to before? Will everybody be content? This can be difficult for you and the other involved parties to do all on your own, or without someone with expertise. Therefore, you can consider involving a facilitator.

Some community members I spoke to put parts of this step-by-step plan into practise. For example:

Emil's community had the habit of eating together every day. One of Emil's values is to eat vegan in order to reduce climate impact. Therefore, he asked his fellow members to adapt by eating vegan at supper time, during their shared meal. The others were either fond of animal products or unfamiliar with cooking fully plant-based meals, so they were not willing to make this big change. A conflict could easily have arisen at this point but luckily, it didn't. They went into conversation and they agreed on eating vegan at least once a week. Also, on other days they would put cheese and dairy products separate on the table whenever possible, so Emil could still eat a vegan meal and at the same time enjoy dinner with everyone else. In this way, they remained true to their vision of eating together but also reduced the intake of animal products, taking into account everyone's values.

Martha valued effective and productive meetings. However, because of living communally, she had shifted her mindset about what's most important in her life, and developed her core value of being soft, kind, and closely connected to those around her. She adapted her view on what made for "a good meeting," from quick and always on the subject to a chance to connect, reflect, and check in with each other. She and her fellow board members went into discussion and adapted their meetings to embody this ideology, as they all agreed on these values. Martha said to me: "It is necessary to meet each other as people, as human beings, not just colleagues. If you go straight into agenda items and decisions that need to be made, that's the death of companionship and the start of boredom, and that causes a lot of conflicts and friction." She and the rest of the board come together now every two weeks not just to "have a meeting" but to talk about small things in their lives that keep them busy, their values and ideas, have lunch, and then go into agenda items. All of this sometimes takes more than half a day.

A small rural, Christian community that I joined for one day used an external facilitator to guide a discussion positively, leading to more peaceful and calmer ways of talking about disagreements. The five adults in this community have one general

meeting every week. Instead of discussing frustrations or tensions each week, they arrange for a permanent facilitator to join them once every six weeks. This meeting is dedicated entirely to talking through matters that brought up emotions, and resolving (mutual) tensions and conflicts. Everyone can speak freely without paying attention to the clock or to whether everyone is getting an equal turn, as this is the facilitator's job. The defined six-week schedule gives people the guarantee that their frustrations will be expressed, therefore also giving a peace of mind in the interim. By making this a recurring event, they avoid the need to enlist someone when a conflict is about to arise, which can give charge to an already tense situation. If you live in a community and are considering this strategy, it is important you choose a facilitator who (in time) knows and understands the people in your group as well as your values, and can guide meetings and communication without interfering in the content.

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I've learned from Emil and Martha that it is worth adapting your habits, meetings, or mindset, if you can stay true to your values, because it can lead to a greater collective good and a strong bond between you and your community members. In fact, as in the case of Martha, adapting might even *lead* you to your core values! Still, adapting is a difficult thing to do as it asks you to step away from the familiar, the "normal" or safe situation you might be in. When adapting your behaviour seems the same as breaking loose from your or your community's core values and ideologies, it is even less attractive to do.

However, being flexible and adaptable when a fellow member or situation asks you to can be done very well *whilst* remaining true to those values. Chances are in fact that

values are shared between you and your fellow community members. Most important, if we can be flexible and adaptable in this way, it will lead to less conflict and create more tolerant attitudes to ourselves and to our neighbours. This in turn will help us to restore a softer, kinder relationship to the world. 🌱

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*To protect privacy, Jeanne, Pablo, Tess, Sasha, Emil, and Martha are all pseudonyms.*

*Freija Leeuwenburgh, 23, recently moved to a cohousing in Brussels. She previously lived in cohousing in Utrecht in her native Netherlands for more than three years, which she describes as "the greatest years of my life so far." During her studies, she conducted qualitative research on conflict management within Dutch Intentional Communities and wrote her thesis on this topic. In her daily life she draws and paints portraits, plays theatre, and loves to experiment in the kitchen.*

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1. Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants*. Penguin UK, 2020, 195.  
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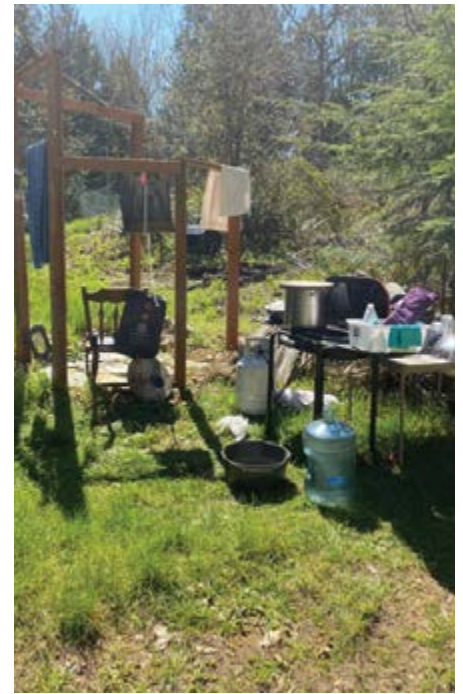
**Community house in Groningen,  
The Netherlands.**

Stefan Hoevenaar



# Building the Life I Dream

By Colleen



**Editor's Note:** Postponed from COMMUNITIES #198, "Building from the Ground Up," the following story holds many lessons about adaptation as well.

In the last few years, I have recreated my life from scratch. From whole cloth. From the ground up. These are old metaphors made new, particularly for someone who jumped into the deep end of homesteading.

My 47th birthday, the worst of my life, was spent cramming my worldly possessions into an antique camping trailer, already overloaded with my fiancé's possessions. I did the bulk of the work, my fiancé barely hobbling on a broken ankle. We were set to cross America just as the nation shut down from Covid. Our destination was a parcel of raw, rural, Pacific Northwest land with only a well, an outhouse, a humble start at a forest garden, materials for a planned cordwood cabin, and a yurt set up for camping and storage. I was leaving behind my teenage daughter in others' care, as well as a community that now treated me as *persona non grata* for doing so. As I loaded up the trailer in misery, I consoled myself that at least I would never have to do such a thing again.

I did it again the next day.

My fiancé, whom I'll call Mattie, had wildly misjudged the capacity of the trailer. It broke down in a spectacular spray of orange sparks, 15 miles into the trip. By the end of reloading our possessions into a U-haul, I was sobbing, bruised, and exhausted... which was also how my bank account would feel after much exposure to Mattie's way of doing things. We had previously lived in separate towns, and now—without a camping trailer to shelter in at the end of our trip—we would be sharing the 200-square-foot, three-season yurt.

Mattie had concealed much of who she was before the move. I quickly learned that she was more a dependent than the helpmeet I expected. Without her, though, I would have been in the high percentage of attempted homesteaders who fail, because I had *no* idea what I was getting into. I lacked the knowledge base, strength, or skillset to do what I intended.

Apart from a lifetime of labor, a lot of brute strength, and an (over)abundance of

carpenter's tools, Mattie had a farm kid background. Her first move was to buy a tractor to prepare ground for a structure. She then had two used shipping containers delivered, one for a workshop and the other intended for storage.

Meanwhile, with the nation dislocated by Covid, my phone serving as wonky internet, and a generator supplying a few deafening, expensive hours of power a day, I struggled to make progress on a variety of fronts. I learned to chop wood and cook on the tiny yurt stove, and created spaces for sleeping, cooking, washing dishes, and showering. Where I live is more of an intersection than a town, but it's between two small cities, so I explored them for garden supply, grocery, and laundromat options. The plants of the forest garden that hadn't already died were barely limping along and needed nigh-endless work to enhance their soil's fertility, let their roots stretch out, and constantly beat back the weeds, including incorrigible invasives. (And, starting pandemic supply issues in the face, I couldn't help but give myself yet more work, in buying additional food-bearing perennials to get started.)

Hardest of all, I wrestled with the county to even understand what was needed to get permits for building my intended tiny house. I had read books and taken a class in my chosen method, cordwood cabin building, and before moving out, had worked with a logger to create massive timbers and rounds for making my walls. It hadn't occurred to me that the building codes where I was going could be so different from where I learned the art that the county would never permit my house at all.

But it also hadn't occurred to me that I could fail at this endeavor. I had put all of my eggs in this basket. So when it became undeniable that we'd never get permission to build the cabin, we pivoted to the shipping container already present. With Mattie already having run through her available funds, I broke into the money intended for my cabin, and she created us a viable living space that would pass muster with the county.

Well, eventually. Kind of. Okay, not really. Yeah, no.

Mattie did not have the skillset or focus to understand what was required and do all the necessary steps, alone, in the right order, to turn a corrugated steel box into a home. Now, she had exponentially more idea of how to do it than did I, child of the suburbs. But creating doors and windows, bump-outs for a bathroom and a through-

way between the shipping containers, a zone for a wood stove, electrical wiring and lighting, insulated walls and ceiling, a real floor, sinks/shower/plumbing, and then (deep breath), setting up the interior with shelving, storage, seating, counter and desk space, composting toilet, a refrigerator, laundry, beds...? That is what eventually happened, but much of it was like pulling teeth, little of it functioned quite right, and all of it took vastly more time and money than expected. Nor—as I learned gradually, later, and counter to her assertions—would much of it satisfy the county's requirements.

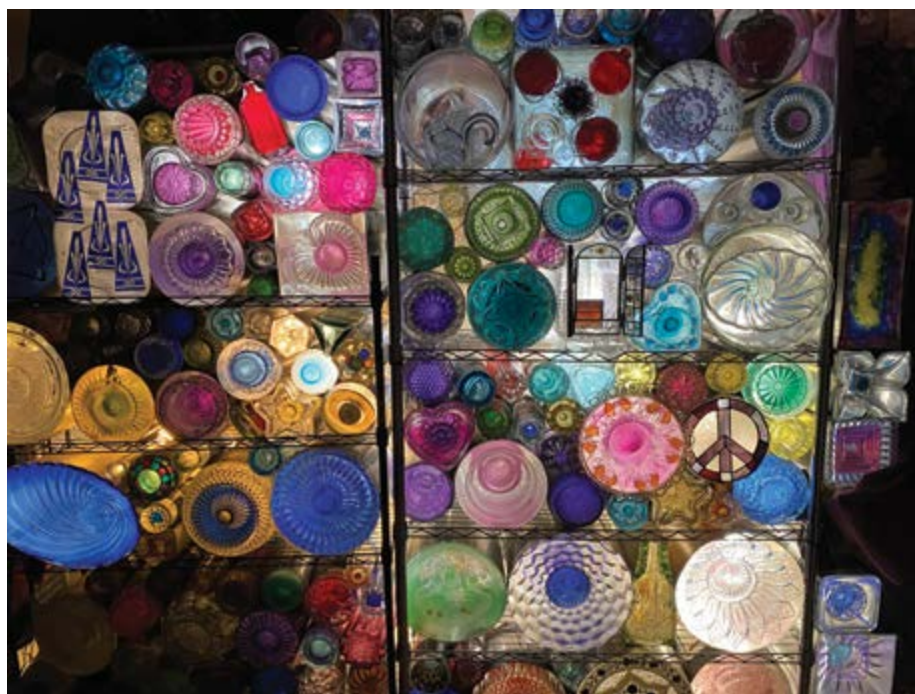
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As our first fall dribbled into winter, it felt like life was made out of setbacks. The yurt was a three-season affair, so big chunks of time were spent in chopping wood small and feeding it to the tiny stove. As the famous PNW rains got underway, my outdoor kitchen became a marsh, and the driveway, a mudpit. It took a week of work to haul and arrange log splits, bigger gravel, landscaping cloth, and smaller gravel to make the driveway passable again. Rain, wind, and snow destroyed the tarp solutions for keeping things dry. We rented an excavator and dug a 500-foot-long trench for bringing us power, but it filled with water before we got in conduit, resulting in days of battling with a sump pump. Progress on making the shipping container move-in-ready slowed to a crawl, with Mattie spending ever more time and money on vanity projects within it.

But on December 24, Mattie completed the bunk beds that I commissioned—the only solution for our hallway of a house—and we moved in. Poorly- and half-built, it was still the best Christmas present ever to upgrade from the yurt's vinyl walls and mildewing floor. Six weeks later, we got power to the house, and with it, a smidgen of hot running water and satellite internet. I have come to understand these things as luxuries to be treasured, a lesson that will always stay with me.

With our lives having some components in place of modern functionality, it was time to look for jobs. My old career of massage therapy was not viable now for many reasons, and so I kept my eyes and mind open for pointers to a new one. I surprised myself (and almost everyone who knows me) when I took my success with the excavator as a sign that I could handle big machinery, and went to school to get a Commercial Drivers License.

It was *hard*. I am not mechanically inclined, and my state has some pretty absurd



Photos courtesy of Colleen





testing requirements: most fail, often multiple times. I wiped my tears, gritted my teeth, shifted gears in every possible sense, and got my CDL. And then it was hard again, finding a local job that paid decently, would take an inexperienced driver, held the right amount of physical work to keep me active, and wanted me during reasonable hours.

I found it in the moving industry. It turns out that a strong, capable, dedicated, fast-learning woman with an eye for 3D Tetris is just what they need, and it turns out that I am that. I've thrived in the man's world of packing, loading, and driving, and I'm told both by my co-workers and by my shippers (those whom I pack) that they are grateful for and impressed by me. For someone who left her world of before with her tail between her legs, it's very validating. It is, however, unpredictably long hours, especially in the summer when there is homesteading work clamoring to be done.

With Mattie finding a job the same time I did, even farther away than mine, developing the homestead was secondary and even slower to accomplish. Being new to gardening in this area meant learning a lot of what not to do—the hard way. Keeping up with watering, fertilizing, and weeding so many young plants is onerous, especially while trying to wrest the land from the iron grip of invasives. Mattie's attention, so divided, rarely found its way towards making the house permit-ready. And many of her

hacked solutions broke quickly, with results like weeks spent trying ensure our flow of water.

However, we were no longer alone on the land. Mattie met some fellow homesteaders, and in the summer of 2021 I invited them to join us. They brought their trailer, and dreams of alternative building practices and livestock that dovetailed with my own. They brought support, too: returning from work nine-to-12 hours after heading out meant that I really appreciated having someone else make dinner or water a garden.

Mattie's attention did not stay long on integrating the new residents. Disillusioned still to be struggling with elements of basic survival here, in the fall of 2021, she started obsessing over another woman. She would beg off when the new residents and I did community-building activities, and instead hang out in—but not use—her overstuffed workshop.

And apparently plot her escape from this life. I had previously witnessed Mattie re-writing history in her head with people we both knew, and had wondered what would happen if she did it with me. I learned: she would leave on New Year's Eve for her new love-interest when asked to attend to her promises and responsibilities. She said she would return in three days—and indeed did so, while I was at work, to leave her engagement ring and my credit card that she had used so much to so little end. She also left most of what she'd accumulated here, including the tractor, now broken and in the way.

What she took, apart from a handful of clothes, was \$14,000 of mine—a fraction of the money of mine that she'd spent, but an amount she had promised to repay, and could have, from funds which had just come into her possession. Yet I never heard from her, in any format, again.

And she left plenty behind besides her junk. She left me with people who witnessed what happened and gave me love and support through the hard times, who have complementary interests and a willingness to work with me through conflicts. I don't know how my little chosen family might continue to evolve, but I do know that I can't do this alone.

• • •

I raged for a minute, and then I stripped her detritus from my life. The minuscule home fits one person much better than two, and I've made it over with my own decor and fixed a lot of problems that she never got around to. I repurposed her workshop as much-needed shared social space, and it still holds the fraction of the tools that are actually useful here. I sold her tractor and everything else to the neighbor guy who runs mega-yardsales every year, in return for hauling it all away, some cash, and



some future help on the cabin. It's been a year of re-imagining the space in her wake, of discovering possibilities that she precluded.

That's also been true interpersonally and even romantically. The area where I live is well-suited to homesteading types, so it hasn't been hard to find like-minded people. It's a bonus that the folks around here are more fun and less work to be with. Nicer, too—community-minded instead of self-absorbed.

So where am I at now?

My goal in establishing this place was to create a sustainable haven for me and my people—whatever that may mean—from the worsening social/political/ecological turbulence of the world. We are a long way from having a place that can provide an array of basic needs to an array of people. But we're also a long way from where we started. In my first year here, I was showering from a bag and learning to heat and cook with wood stoves, the forest garden was in pathetic shape, whole days were lost to battling invasives, and disappointing setbacks were the norm. I often felt incompetent, floundering, and (apart from distractible Mattie) alone.

Now I have a cozy, functional place to live and welcome our stream of guests. I have people, both here and in the vicinity, helping me to realize my own and this place's potential. I have a career in which I can feel essential and appreciated, and know my value as part of a team.

The once-miserable forest garden holds about 100 thriving plants of about 30 varieties, many of them already starting to fulfill their potential of producing food. The increasing bounty from the annual beds shows that I'm getting the hang of gardening in this climate. There's a sprawling cornucopia of a perennial garden, with medicinal and culinary herbs and veggies taking off, a year-round supply of colorful flowers to brighten the eye, and bark paths to invite wandering (and retard invasives).

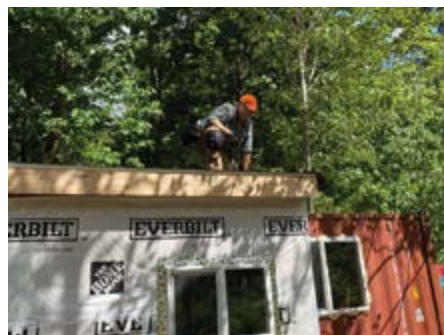
And now I have moved on from getting the shipping container structure permit-

ted, and am proceeding with the cordwood cabin I came here to build. Three years of messily learning what not to do is serving me well, as is the network of professionals that I assembled in creating my starter house. On the cusp of my 50th birthday, I am also on the cusp of breaking ground for a house four years in the making. By the year's end, I believe I will have my house.

And then perhaps it will be time for livestock, or a bespoke greenhouse, or little aquaculture ponds. Homesteading will always be a work in progress—as will I. For now, I feel great strength, pride, and joy in how, first upon the bones of my failures and then upon increasing successes, I have come so far in building the life I dream. 🌸

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*Colleen likes playing with plants, animals, words, touch, brain states, expectations, and her mandolin. She wants to invite you in for tea and a backrub. Please respond (including to the tea-and-backrub offer) care of the magazine.*





# Finding Hope in the Face of Powerlessness

By Sage Siera



Lorna Pearman



Sage Siera

There's an old rock quarry in my hometown where my childhood best friend and I would play after school: giant, tumbling rocks where we would climb and create worlds far more magnificent than our own. This place was a safe place, a haven to escape my friend's bellowing parents, a place that gave life to our imaginations, a place that would echo back our fears and our tears and occasionally reveal a hidden quartz dusted in soft ocher mineral dust. By day, we fed pigs on their farm and I prayed it would not be the day I waited while my friend or her siblings received spankings. I didn't understand why none of them ever seemed to cry. Summer nights we tumbled around in our tent, pressing lips and bare skin together, trying to make sense of this world where pain was the norm. It always felt like a somber land, but the quarry held us throughout the years. It was no stranger to pain.

Today that quarry has all but been reduced to a hole in the side of the mountain, and two of the three siblings, including my friend, have taken their own lives. There's a hollow ache that comes from watching a person or a place you love slowly being destroyed. I still hear the blows of dynamite on Parvin Butte echoing through my heart like the spankings I heard those children take. Rocks crumble like hope and innocence, ricocheting through my nervous system, reminding me of the empty feeling of powerlessness that has been with me my whole life. I wish I could bring every crystal and stone back to that mountain, and I wish I could bring every shred of childlike wonder and safety, if it ever existed, back to those children, now gone. It is no wonder some days I find it hard to get out of bed "for no apparent reason" when I look out on a mountainside eaten by a beast, and read on Facebook of another soul consumed by their trauma. I have watched and listened and held space for these tragedies, finding the sparkles hidden within, but never knowing how to protect them.

These wild places are sanctuaries, home to animals, fungi, and plants, all who bear witness to the complexities of the human experience. We used to smash our rage on those rocks and search for glimmers of magic after escaping a home so unsafe

and scary, and now these sanctuaries are blasted apart to be used as a "natural resource." But what is this resource if I cannot go to the land and bring my grief and rage of the injustices of abuse? How can this resource serve if I cannot bring my prayers and stolen crystals back to that land? Some things we've desecrated beyond repair, like that beautiful mountainside once home to a forest, like the hearts and spirits of those children who are no longer on Earth.

There is only one thing I know: we are mirror reflections of the land, we are shaped by the land, held by the land, and what we do to the land, we do to ourselves and each other. We can tend to those wild places in our hearts and backyards, or we can break them down. We can bury the pain of watching that which we love eroded by abuse and greed, or we can share and co-hold our stories. We can put our money into hands who listen to and honor the land and fight to make sense of the chaos of human consumption. We can powder and press dusty minerals, reunite them with the waters of the creek and our tears, bind them with prayers that someday we might wake up, that we will remember our likeness, that we really do need the land to survive these times. We can take all that and paint our power back into our collective hearts, one brush stroke at a time.

We can take what has crumbled and create something new,  
remembrance and prayers,  
soft dust and tears,  
innocence and hope. 🌿

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*Sage Siera has been living at Lost Valley Education Center since 2018, and grew up right down the road from the ecovillage. She has served in many capacities on the community level from conflict mediation to facilitation and serving on the Board of Directors, but her passion has always been in her spiritual connection to the land. As an herbalist, eco-sensualist, and highly sensitive person, creating medicine and art is a way for her to process her ecstatic love and grief for the landscape she has witnessed change over her lifetime. You can learn more about her work as a full spectrum doula and herbalist at [www.moonmamaartemisia.com](http://www.moonmamaartemisia.com).*

# Working Effectively with Especially Challenging Behaviors, Part Six

By Diana Leafe Christian

**“Y**ou’d all better watch out!,” a member I’ll call Olive declared loudly, leaping out of her chair in our meeting, visibly upset.

Our facilitator had just stopped her, quite courteously, from continuing to argue about an issue we’d just finished discussing, and said he was moving on to our next agenda item.

Someone hesitantly asked Olive what she meant by saying, “Watch out!” Was she actually threatening to do something, and if so, what? What should we watch out *for*?

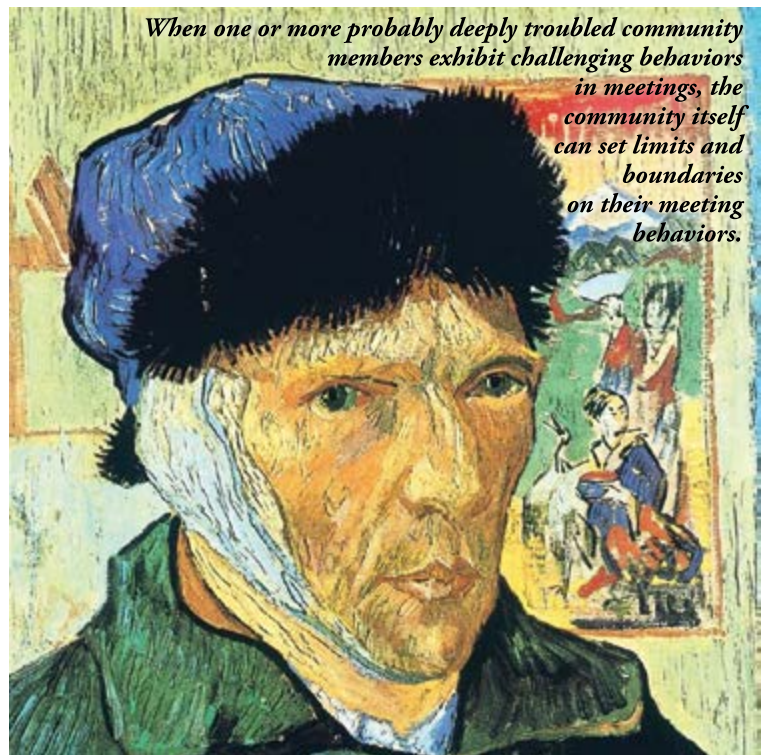
“*What should you watch...out...for?!*,” she repeated, outraged, glaring around the circle.

“That you all don’t *trip over your own stupidity!!*”

Outrage, threats, insults. Arrogance, outbursts, resentment. This is what we’d come to expect in many of our meetings. Olive<sup>1</sup> seemed to assume her values and lifestyle choices were the standards for our community, no matter that we’d never made a decision to adopt her values and lifestyle choices. Nevertheless, she became incensed whenever we violated them.<sup>2</sup>

And while Olive often behaved this way in meetings, and interpersonally outside of meetings, sometimes “targeting” other community members she resented (see fourth article, issue #197), she had admirable qualities too. She was a beloved sustainability teacher and a mentor to several of our young women. She led rituals and songs honoring the Earth and Nature. She facilitated meetings and was good at it. Many community members appreciated how she contributed to the community, although they were aware of her other side too.

In those days we used classic, traditional consensus, meaning anyone could block a proposal if they believed it would harm the community. But we didn’t know enough about consensus at the time to ask the person to explain how approving the proposal would harm us, and to require their explanation to make *sense* to the rest of us—to seem reasonable. And while no one blocked proposals in those days, Olive often let us know she didn’t support a proposal that everyone else wanted, and implied or sometimes outright declared she very well *might* block it. When this happened our facilitator wouldn’t test for consensus, because the facilitator and everyone else in the meeting believed the proposal couldn’t pass anyway, so why bother testing for consensus? Sometimes when people would talk about an idea informally at a meal or a social gathering, Olive would let them know she didn’t approve of it, and implied that if anyone were to actually propose the idea, she would block it. Thus many ideas never actually became proposals for fear of what Olive might do. And while she



*When one or more probably deeply troubled community members exhibit challenging behaviors in meetings, the community itself can set limits and boundaries on their meeting behaviors.*

Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear, Vincent Van Gogh, 1889, Courtauld Galleries, London.





*If left unchecked, the challenging behaviors of meeting participants can be so disruptive, so consistently, that increasing numbers of members stop going to meetings altogether.*

consistently presented herself as victimized by and powerless in the community, with her energy of menace and implied threats to block popular ideas, she was actually the most powerful person here. In those days, given both her status as a teacher and mentor and her power-over behaviors in meetings, Olive was in fact the uncrowned Queen of our Community.

### What Are “Especially Challenging Behaviors”?

As described in the first five articles of this series (see [genus.net/DLC](https://genus.net/DLC)), “especially challenging behaviors” in community are like those of Dwight, described in the first article: disdainful and contemptuous, lying, and behaving heartlessly towards others. And the behaviors of Mavis, often overbearing and harsh yet unable to tolerate attempts to give her feedback. And like Griswald (second article): self-centered, lacking empathy, and expressing rage, hostility, and vengeance against his community. And Eldred (third article): outraged, resentful, and holding a grudge for years; Olive and Andraste (fourth article): unrelenting hostility and contempt towards those they targeted; and Hugo and Umberto (fifth article): aggressive and manipulative yet ever-victimized, while grooming the most vulnerable, self-doubting fellow community members to be their loyal followers or “minions.”

Mental health professionals call these “narcissistic” attitudes and behaviors. (See list, p. 55.) These aren’t the occasional behaviors that many of us can fall into on a bad day, but behaviors that recur frequently. Yet people who exhibit them typically do only *some* of them—their particular cluster of these behaviors—while other people do other clusters of behaviors. Further, people with these behaviors often exhibit them only sometimes,

and often only with certain people, whom mental health professionals call their “targets.”

Since most community members *don’t* exhibit these behaviors, it can be disorienting and confusing when we find them in our group. But when one or more people consistently and frequently behave this way it can have a devastating effect on other community members, and on the whole group, like Olive’s behaviors in our community.

### You Owe Me!

One result of the classic, traditional consensus that many communities practice is the mistaken belief that because a proposal can’t be passed unless everyone approves it (except those who stand aside), then if anyone feels upset about decisions made in a meeting they hadn’t attended, or even another member’s actions, the group has somehow “violated consensus.” And therefore they are obligated to hold one or more whole-group meetings to accommodate the offended member. They believe that, as “a consensus community,” they must make sure no one ever feels upset—that they owe *anyone upset over a decision* whole-group discussions to somehow work it out. And while this belief is not in fact a tenet of consensus, like many communities using classic, traditional consensus as my community did at the time, we truly believed this.

And Olive was our most frequently upset member. In her view, many of us kept “harming the community” by taking actions that offended her because they violated her personal values and lifestyle choices, which she assumed were—or should be—our whole community’s shared values and lifestyle choices.

**The Offending Cow.** Once a young couple bought a milk cow so they could make buttermilk and yogurt to save on their food bill. This was in line with our community values and intentions, as we aspired to live simply and frugally, and our founders had assumed various members would start onsite farming enterprises, including raising livestock. Also, most of were omnivores, so consuming dairy products onsite violated no community agreements. Nevertheless, Olive, a vegan, demanded a whole-group meeting because she was adamantly opposed to any of us raising livestock, which she saw as animal slavery. The couple saving money by owning a cow upset her terribly. Even though Olive ostensibly knew our community values around farms and livestock, she nevertheless demanded, and got, a whole-group meeting to discuss the offending cow.

**The Offending Well.** Another time one of our neighborhoods got community permission to drill a well as their water source. This allowed our community to still meet state requirements about the maximum number of residents who could share any one onsite water source. Because other neighborhoods

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**Olive was in fact the uncrowned Queen of our Community.**

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## “Our committee is doing better now than in all the years since we started.”

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had already tapped the nearby springs and this neighborhood wasn't near a spring, the only way they could have water—and our community could stay within the law—was to drill a well. Olive had been out of town when we gave the neighborhood permission to drill the well. When she learned of this decision she was outraged and demanded a meeting to stop the well. She was in touch with what the Earth wanted and needed, she told us. We should never *take*—that is, *steal*—water from our Mother by drilling, but only receive water from Her as a gift given freely by streams and springs. If the neighborhood drilled their well we would not only violate the principles of Permaculture, but would also violate our Mother. And while our community bases its land-use patterns on Permaculture principles, the ideas about stealing or receiving water from the Earth are Eco-Feminism principles, not Permaculture principles, and we'd never agreed to practice Eco-Feminism.

**The Offending Community.** Another time she and two of her women supporters called for an actual strike against our community. No one should facilitate meetings or take minutes anymore, they said, until our community paid hourly wages to facilitators and minute-takers, who were usually women, and who, like most others doing tasks for the community, were volunteers fulfilling community labor requirements. We should strike, Olive and her supporters believed, because while our community paid an hourly wage for members, usually men, to fell trees and build roads, and some us hired community members, who were always men, to build their cabins and homes, there were no onsite paying jobs for women. Their assumption was our community *owed* women members a way to earn a living onsite, since, after all, men could make a living here. Why should women do the unpaid “women's jobs”? (Nowadays both women and men are tree-fellers, road-builders, construction workers, meeting facilitators, and minute-takers.) If we all stopped doing any work for the community, including not building roads, facilitating meetings, or taking minutes, Olive and her supporters declared in their strike document, we would force our community to pay women to facilitate meetings and take minutes. It was as if they saw our members as employees who should go on strike against Management. Except of course, we were *all* the Management.

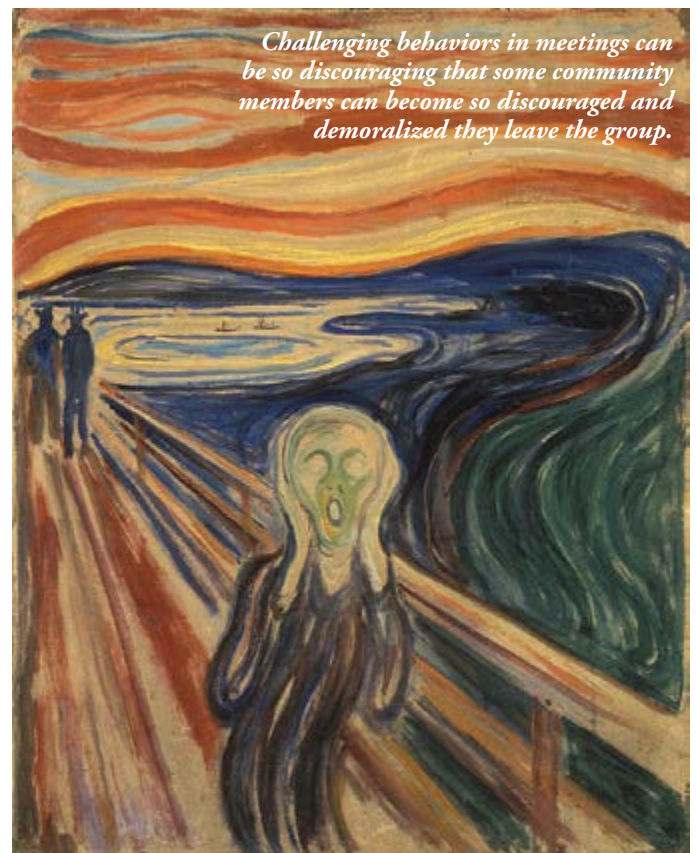
However, our founders had created an independent-income community, not an income-sharing one, and never intended to guarantee onsite employment. In our early days of carving out roads and building small homes in the mountains, our limited paid work was mostly about building roads and constructing buildings. One of Olive's supporters, who better understood our community's economic process, apologized the next day for asking us to harm ourselves with a work stoppage; her other

supporter realized this a bit later and also apologized. Dealing with Olive's “Threats and Demands” document, as it came to be called, required a series of frustrating, go-nowhere community meetings, including an exhausting day-long marathon, with no resolution. Finally, at a meeting of that year's community president and his team, Olive tore up the document and threw it in the air, stopping her strike campaign. And while her friends had apologized, she never did.

It's natural to expect fellow community members to want to engage in productive dialog in areas of disagreement, but we learned it didn't seem possible to have productive conversations with Olive. She behaved as if she couldn't tolerate the idea she might be mistaken about something, as if being “right” were a life or death issue, and people's disagreeing with her meant psychic obliteration, annihilation.

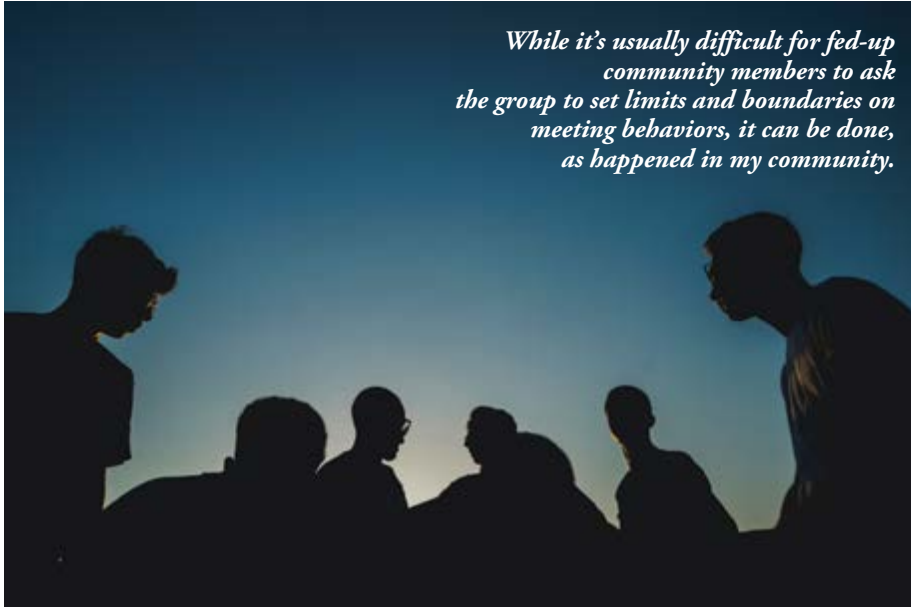
After the many tense, contentious whole-community meetings with Olive about these issues, the couple still milked their cow and saved on their food bill. The neighborhood drilled its shallow well and our community met state water requirements. We didn't go on strike against ourselves and women as well as men continued to facilitate meetings and take minutes as volunteers. But over the years Olive's attitudes, behaviors, and demands like these exhausted and demoralized us, costing our group meeting time, energy, and community morale.

The first four articles in the series focused on six ways individual members can protect themselves from these behaviors: (1) Learning all we can about these behaviors from books and videos; (2) *Lowering our expectations* that people with these behaviors will someday finally become cooperative, caring, or



The Scream, Edvard Munch, 1893. Munch Museum, Oslo, Norway.





*While it's usually difficult for fed-up community members to ask the group to set limits and boundaries on meeting behaviors, it can be done, as happened in my community.*

empathetic; (3) Setting limits and boundaries about unacceptable behaviors directed toward us; (4) Making in-person and email interactions public whenever possible; (5) Using the Inner Ninja technique; and (6) Getting outside healing help for *ourselves*. In the fifth article (issue #198), we saw how small groups of friends can help each other and the community by creating mutual support groups or creating alliances and/or petitions to request changes.

But what can whole communities do? What could Griswald's community do about his vengeance, or Hugo's or Umberto's communities do when they turned potential new members against their communities? What could our community do about Olive?

### We Can Ask our Community to Set Limits and Boundaries

The last article described how a small group's informal alliance and almost-petition persuaded our community president that year and her advisors to finally remove Cornelius, a problematic member, from their team. Some years later some of the same people sent a petition about Olive, signed by six community members, to that year's president and advisory team.

"We believe Olive's behaviors in our business meetings frequently have a painful and disruptive, unmanageable quality," the petition read in part. "As if she were drunk or possessed by some dark aspect of her personality, our attempts to understand her underlying motivations or find a reasonable resolution go nowhere. ... When such behavior becomes chronic it undermines our ability to continue our meeting without entering a downward spiral in which arguments and processing can yield neither mutual understanding nor any level of resolution. There seems to be no other recourse but to insist that Olive's behavior be kept out of our meetings and, hopefully, dealt with in a more appropriate and useful venue. ... We ask you to inform Olive by letter that she must not bring these behaviors to our meetings anymore...(and) empower facilitators to remove her from meetings when her behavior gets out of hand."

While the president and her team considered this petition, they took no action. The request was too extreme, they said, and represented the views of too few people. And out of compassion for Olive, they didn't want her to feel targeted. (In the next article we'll look at the "Rescuer" role and the harm it can do as described in the Karpman Drama Triangle.)

### If at First You Don't Succeed...

A few months later a group of about 10 members, including some of the same people, showed up at a meeting of the president and her team. They were there, they said, to protest Olive's latest disruption of a business meeting. Because she'd dis-

liked a long agriculture proposal and felt disgusted that the proposal folder had a plastic cover, she'd angrily ripped off the cover and threw it in the air, berating the agriculture committee because their proposal itself and its plastic cover would harm and defile the Earth. This was the last straw for many in our community, so this informal alliance arrived at the advisory team meeting *en masse* to formally ask them to *please do something!*

The president and her team finally overcame their reluctance. After deliberating on this request they decided to send Olive a letter, and shared the letter with the community:

"Your behavior in this process, especially in our business meetings, has become, in our opinion, a threat to both the process, and the well-being and development of our community," it began. "Our specific concerns with your behavior are:

1. Lack of trust in our process, in our committees, and in other members
2. Long-standing interpersonal conflicts between you and other members
3. Unwillingness to cooperate, collaborate or compromise
4. An energy of stopping proposals rather than helping develop alternatives
5. Frequent expressions of anger in meetings, energetically, verbally, and in body language
6. Attempting to enforce rigid idealism on the rest of the community

"We are therefore asking that you not attend our business meetings or participate in any other way in our decision-making process for at least a year or until you are able to resolve these issues. During this time, we suggest that you keep up with our community conversation, reflect on how your behavior affects the process, and if you wish, offer creative solutions to our problems. Of course, we are concerned not just for the community as a whole but also for you as an individual, and we do want to offer our support and assistance, and to work with you during this period. We hope that you can see this as an opportunity to give energy and attention to yourself and your own life, and to mend your relationships in the community."

In our community this was an aston-

ishing, unprecedented step! To the best of my knowledge it was the first time we had ever officially—and publicly—addressed a community member about their harmful behaviors and instituted real consequences. *Basically this was the community itself setting limits and boundaries.* It carried the implication, “And if you keep doing these things we can always set these limits again.”

### Did This Change Anything?

Yes, and No. As noted in past articles, people with these kinds of behaviors—including unearned entitlement—usually find it unbearable to be constrained by limits and boundaries, and typically respond with incredulity and outrage. How dare you do this to me? To *me!* And people with these behaviors often cannot see that it’s their *behaviors* that elicit the limits and boundaries, not their opinions.

Olive did stop attending business meetings. But she sent the community an email shimmering with outrage, and threatened to make a documentary, “*Silenced!*” to expose how we silence members who speak the Truth on behalf of the Earth. Unable to tolerate the limits and boundaries we (publicly) placed on her, she moved out of the community altogether and stayed away for two years. When she returned and began attending business meetings again she behaved relatively peacefully, for a few weeks anyway. So as to whether our community’s action helped the situation: Yes, because we got slightly more than two years of peaceful business meetings without Olive’s challenging behaviors.

And also No, because after a few weeks back in residence she resumed her usual meeting behaviors. She had not mended her relationships with the many members with whom she had longstanding conflicts. At that time in our history our members were managing our community more effectively than in past years when members like Cornelius got away with not paying our annual dues and fees and violating other agreements (described in the last article). But we still didn’t understand management well enough to require Olive to comply with *all* the requests in the letter before she could participate in meetings again.

### Our Community Takes Action—Changing to Modified Consensus

Let’s say your community uses classic, traditional consensus, in which anyone can block a proposal “for the good of the community.” So your community just drops the issue and stops trying to solve the problem. Convinced that the people who blocked the proposal would block any further attempts to solve the problem with future proposals, the group just gives up. This of course results in the inevitable resentment, discouragement, and community demoralization.

One way communities can reduce instances of people with especially challenging behaviors blocking proposals everyone else wants is to shift from classic, traditional consensus to a modified form, such as the N St. Consensus Method, for example. My community switched to a modified version of the N St. Method, partly because Olive and her two supporters blocked or threatened to block proposals most of us wanted, bringing several attempts to create small onsite agricultural enterprises to a standstill. Of course Olive and her followers threatened to block our first proposal to shift to this newly proposed consensus method in meeting after meeting. Our Governance Committee (which I was a part of) kept bringing the proposal back to the next meeting and advocating it again. Finally, after a year of this impasse, Olive and her friends, discouraged because the rest of us advocated the proposal so persistently, allowed us to pass it, but only if we modified it so much it barely resembled the original version we’d proposed. The weakened version that finally did pass, with Olive and her followers standing aside, was far less able to reduce frequent, frivolous, or personal-preference blocking than the original version. Still, it was a start.

A year later our Governance Committee introduced a second proposal to change our consensus method further toward our original idea. Olive and her followers threatened to block this proposal too, until, again discouraged because the rest of the community was so motivated and determined, they allowed it pass by only standing aside from it. We were *only* able to approve our second proposal for a modified consensus *because* we’d passed the first proposal about this the year before. Because our first proposal “opened the door,” you could say, our second proposal for a further modified form of consensus was able to barely squeak by.

A few months later one our founders who lived offsite returned to our meetings and threatened to block our slate of proposals to change our financial and legal system. We hoped to change this to prevent the potential legal and financial risks we’d inadvertently created in our early days. (See “Your Community and the Law,” issue #182.) The founder who returned to our meetings posed *such* a threat to our being able to approve the proposals to shift to our new financial/legal method, that we proposed a



*Changing the group’s decision-making method is another way communities can reduce challenging behaviors in meetings.*

Declaration of Independence, John Trumbull, 1817. Yale University Art Gallery



*Replacing classic consensus to a modified form of consensus, as my community did, can result in significantly greater cooperation and good will in meetings.*



## Immediately after we instituted our modified consensus method Olive and her followers became more cooperative and congenial in meetings.

third modified consensus proposal that was even more like the N St. Method. Everyone but that founder was on board for this latest proposal, *including* Olive and her friends. We passed our third proposal easily. It had taken our community a full three years, and a serious financial/legal threat, for us to move from the form of consensus where we all had the power to stop any proposal anytime, to a method biased toward *approving* rather than stopping proposals, so we could finally approve our legal and financial proposals.

In the N St. Consensus Method, and my community's modified version, blocks don't stop proposals but only slow them down. The people who blocked a proposal and its advocates are tasked to organize a series of solution-oriented meetings to create a new proposal to address the same issues as the blocked proposal. If they cannot agree and can't create a new proposal, the first proposal comes back to the business meeting for a supermajority vote. The N St. Method has a 65 percent supermajority vote: if at least 65 percent of the full members in the business meeting vote Yes on the returned proposal, it passes. This means that most proposals, or an acceptable modified version created by those who blocked the first proposal, will pass. The percentage needed to pass a returned original proposal in our community is only 61.7 percent—the lowest I've ever heard of in a community using a modified method! I believe we passed such an extreme supermajority fallback vote because we were fed up with Olive and her supporters' blocks and threats to block over the years, and now made worse by our founder's recent threats to block our financial/legal proposals.

Immediately after we instituted our new modified consensus method, Olive and her followers (and everyone else) stopped blocking or threatening to block proposals and became more cooperative and congenial in meetings. Astonishingly, Olive's anguished, disruptive behaviors in meetings were suddenly far milder—she now behaved relatively well. Was it our new method? Because now none of us could stop proposals? Because we all now *had* to cooperate in considering proposals? Shifting to a modified form of consensus can make all the difference in how a group's especially challenging members treat other members and treat the community—not necessarily in social interactions around the community, but at least in meetings!

In 2011 I introduced the N St. Consensus Method to a large German income-sharing community that had been plagued by problems in meetings for years. After they implemented the N St. Method, one of my German friends said using the new method seemed to greatly reduce conflict in meetings. They were now discussing issues more courteously, he said, and passing proposals more easily.

### Another Community Takes Action—The "Two Minute Rule"

While our community's attempt to change Olive's behavior in meetings worked only partially, communities with better skills and experience in community management, and better able to follow through with the limits and boundaries they set, can be more successful in changing these behaviors.

Hugo, described in the fifth article, would disrupt the meetings of committees he wasn't a member of. He'd basically show up as a visitor and hijack the meeting, derail its agenda, and overwhelm its members. Finally his community had had enough. They required all non-committee visitors to limit their comments to two minutes at the start of the meeting and remain silent after that, unless specifically asked a question or asked to comment. When Hugo showed up to the committee meetings again, the facilitator and *four other committee members* (I'm not kidding!) pulled out their cell phones and set

their timers to two minutes—a dramatic but effective non-verbal message.

Of course Hugo was outraged. Curbed by the community’s new agreement, Hugo would sit there, silent and fuming, which, although disruptive in itself, at least allowed the committee to go through its agenda without interruption. “Our Community Life committee is doing better now than in all the years since we started,” its chairperson told me.

### Still Another Community Takes Action—Member Surveys, Rules about Committee Visitors

Another community with especially challenging members who also took over committee meetings approved a proposal that people could no longer sit in on committee meetings they were not a part of unless they first got permission from the committee. And to make sure community members’ voices were heard about issues a committee was considering that could affect everyone (rather than small internal community matters), from then on committees would create member surveys to seek opinions and use the survey results to guide their decisions. People with these behaviors could express their strong opinions in the surveys, and only attend meetings if they got permission first. “Our committees are working so much better now,” one community member told me.

Your community *can* set limits and boundaries on people who disrupt meetings with these kinds of challenging behaviors. You can require them to stop attending meetings for specific periods (if possible, given your community’s legal entity). This can include asking them to heal their relationships with other members, and/or get therapy or some other form of outside healing help. Your community can change from classic, traditional consensus to a modified version.

## Especially Challenging Attitudes and Behaviors

### More Obvious, Overt, Extroverted Narcissistic Behaviors:

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

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

### Less Obvious, Covert, Introverted Narcissistic Behaviors:

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

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

–DLC

Your community can create its own version of a two-minute rule for committee visitors, or seek community input for a committee’s proposals with member surveys, or require people who aren’t members of a committee to get permission first before visiting committee meetings.

### Coming Up

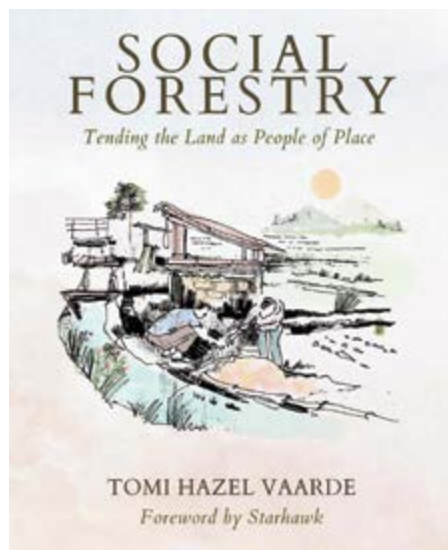
In future issues we’ll look at how communities can also change from classic, traditional consensus to Sociocracy, a self-governance and decision-making method which can curtail especially challenging behaviors in committees and in whole-group meetings. We’ll also examine ways communities can curb these behaviors *outside* of meetings. We’ll consider Dr. Craig Malkin’s Connection Contracts, and how whole communities can use these contracts with members; and how communities can use the “Graduated Series of Consequences” and “Many Raindrops Make a Flood” methods to induce people to tone down their challenging behaviors. Lastly we’ll examine what can *stop* a community from setting limits and boundaries on people who do these behaviors when some community members take on the “Rescuer” role described in the Karpman Drama Triangle. 🌸

*Diana Leaf Christian, author of Creating a Life Together and Finding Community, speaks at conferences, offers consultations, and leads workshops and online trainings on creating successful new communities, and on Sociocracy, an especially effective self-governance and decision-making method. See [www.DianaLeafChristian.org](http://www.DianaLeafChristian.org).*

1. As noted in previous articles, Olive passed away several years ago.

2. It was easy to wonder why Olive joined our community if she didn’t share its basic values and intentions—especially about land use, onsite agriculture, and our internal economic structure. Yet we bore some responsibility for this situation, because in the early years our community was so naive and mismanaged that while our shared values and intentions were implied in our culture, and obvious to anyone who talked at length with existing members, we hadn’t yet learned to state our values and intentions *explicitly*, either on our website, in our agreements, or on community tours. Meanwhile, Olive believed that *her* views were spiritually and ecologically impeccable and all other views were wrong.





# The Promise of Social Forestry

## Social Forestry: Tending the Land as People of Place

*Tomi Hazel Vaarde*

Synergetic Press, Santa Fe and London, 2023, 512 pages.

When I heard that Hazel had written a book, I was very curious to read it. Tomi Hazel Vaarde, known to many as Hazel, is a creative and inspiring teacher whom I had the privilege of learning from in the southern Willamette Valley of Oregon in the early 2000s. Weaving a story in a forest classroom nook or while darning socks in an intentional community classroom, Hazel brought a mix of grounded practicality and magic to each presentation I witnessed. This new book brings me back to those moments, encouraging readers to embrace spiral, non-linear thought processes and inquiry on multiple levels.

“Social Forestry,” Hazel writes, “explores the shapes of relationships. With experience in the woods, access to deep narratives of old forest cultures, and our visionary scenarios, we nurture the entanglement of mutuality in Forests. This is peoples moving toward the future, working from ecological, spiritual, and sociological principles to imagine and remember new/old ways of living with and tending complex forested landscapes.” (p. 33)

This book is a visionary work that also includes practical applications. The “type A” part of me wants to see the connections more clearly but I think Hazel wants us all to learn how to take a spiraling path. As explained in the “How to Read Hazel” section that follows the foreword, reading this book is a unique experience. Just like having a conversation with the author, the text contains puzzles and encourages a reader to struggle, re-read, and loop back to different parts, all with the goal of learning and absorbing information in a new way. I found myself reading some pages or sections many times to glean the multiple layers of meaning, imagining Hazel looking over my shoulder with a gleam in their eye—that’s what they were hoping for! “Acknowledgments of Gratitude” is a creative and well-crafted poem that precedes the first chapter and is a joy to read. It’s a great way to start off a volume that is interwoven throughout with appreciation and gratitude for the work and people inspiring it.

A whole-system-design/permaculture teacher and homesteader myself, I appreciate Hazel’s multifaceted approach to sharing the details in this book and the focus on posters and visuals, reproduced from original posters created during the collaborative process of learning in courses taught by the Siskiyou Permaculture team. I am grateful for the multiple ways that Hazel honors traditional ancestral wisdom at the outset and throughout the text.

True to its focus and intention to be place-based, the book begins with a history of the land, specifically the Siskiyou region where Hazel resides. The first of the book’s four major sections, “Foundations,” uses stories to introduce concepts essential for forest work and regenerative horticulture. For example, Hazel shares perspectives on the benefits to humans and the land of staying close to home. Central to the conversation, and highlighted at the end of the first section, are relationships between people and the landscape. While discussing the need for careful consideration and respect for plant beings, Hazel

shares a story of choosing to cut an oak tree near a building site and the resulting impact and messages that followed, calling it “The Triple Goddess’s Revenge.”

The second section of the book, “In the Forest,” is full of practical information on forest ecology, forestry, and living in the forest, gleaned from Hazel’s lifetime of experience working in the forest. This wealth of knowledge gained through deep observation and respect for the natural environment is evident in such passages as the six-page checklist, “60-Odd Things to Consider Before We Fell a Tree.” Hazel stresses the need for observation on the site, multiple times each day. The author uses the term “climate weirding” to describe the multitude of changes occurring in recent years and the unpredictability of weather, and explains that sensitive time adjustments are often needed. Walking the land is the best way to keep tabs on what is needed and what needs adjusting within the day or week.

The second section also includes practical discussions of fire and fire management, which is becoming a topic that western land dwellers must skill up on. This section also describes charcoal-making and charcoal kiln design. Hazel includes detailed drawings to accompany the wisdom of experience that is shared. Also in this section, “Treasures from Thickets” discusses managing trees and shrubs for diverse forest products including craft and food. Hazel has included a chapter with designs and discussion on the different styles of

forest shelters that can be assembled for short- and long-term life in the forest, as well as some legal considerations to support those who choose to live and work in the woods.

Readers who are familiar with the term “invisible structures” from modern permaculture will understand the topic of the third section of the book, “Toward Cultures of Place.” In this part, Hazel emphasizes the need to “start from here” and assess our reality during a time of chaos and confusion. With a focus on social cohesion, Hazel shares principles of transition and ideas for working together within a physical community by recognizing shared assets and analyzing how to support the local economy and community. The author shares stories from experience doing this work in their own home community. I appreciate the discussion about the ingenuity needed for marketing of forest-based products that can boost the local economy. As Hazel explains, “We’re competing with plastic, which comes from petroleum. I’m hoping that we bring-to-market the idea-of Social Forestry, by showing people what real, Local-Life looks-like.” (p. 329)

This third section also weaves stories about how culture changes during times of transition. Hazel shares visions for how people can work together to weave new stories and create seasonal festivals and ways of living though the year that encompass and support the needs of a wide diversity of humans. I love the way that Hazel incorporates ceremony and the intention we humans can have to connect deeply with the land by working hard and expressing our reverence. The fact that reciprocity and ritual are included under the same cover as the practical forest knowledge reflects the beauty of Hazel’s gift, bringing the reverence together with the necessary grounded practical wisdom.

The last section of the book, “Visioning,” is storytelling full of inspiration. “A Year in Wagner County” describes in evocative detail a possible future for the southern half of the current Jackson County. It’s a story about “adaptation after the collapse of globalism,” a tale of community resilience in which everyone plays a role, traced through the cycle of the seasons. It’s a great way to end the book, but not the story, which is just beginning.

This book is like no other in that it requires the reader to be open-minded as well as diligent in reading, re-reading, and contemplating the riddles and rhythm of the text and stories. Hazel uses uncommon and unconventional sentence structure and hyphenation. The language is poetic and occasionally puzzling. A glossary of terms would be a great addition.

As a reviewer, I am curious as to the intended audience. Forest dwellers? Aspiring rural landowners? Forestry and ecology students? I think that all of these folks and anyone wishing to live in a reciprocal relationship to the forest anywhere on earth will appreciate not only the useful details from a wise and experienced elder but also the graceful and entertaining stories and spirit that Hazel shares. I am inspired by Hazel’s vision and invite you to welcome inspiration too. 🌿

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*Devon Bonady is a mother, homesteader and teacher living in the ancestral lands of the Western Abenaki peoples, not far from the area Hazel describes from childhood. She has lived and worked in community and forests her entire adult life and is grateful for the wisdom and peace that the forest offers.*



Chris Roth



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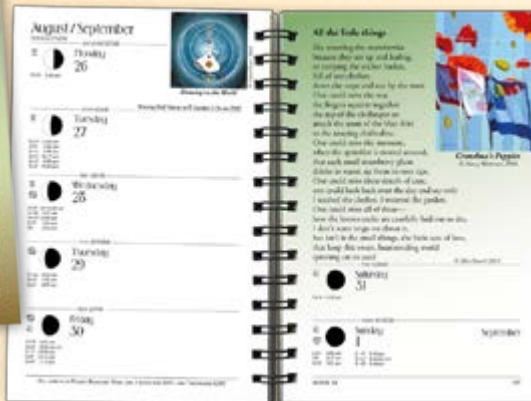
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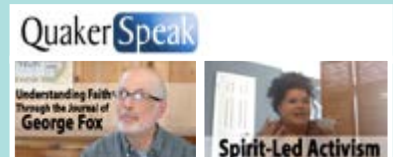
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## ECOVILLAGE TALES

(continued from p. 64)

ing musical groups; and doubling during the day as a venue for yoga classes and distribution site for the CSA farm, with the upstairs apartment rented to ecovillage members.

La Cité Écologique, founded in 1984, now has 100 members and 700 acres of farmland near the village of Ham du Nord, Quebec, about two-and-a-half hours southwest of Montreal. Its original community-owned businesses were an organic farm, health services, a ready-to-eat meal service, a bakery, and a forest management service. It now has 10 onsite community businesses, including Kheops International, a wholesale distributor of gift items, a clothing design and manufacturing business, and a solar energy business, among others.

Founded on spiritual principles, La Cité has as part of its mission the operation of a school offering holistic education for children, focusing on respect for nature and the development of the whole child—spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and physically. And like most ecovillages, it aims to learn to live and demonstrate for others a more holistic, ecologically regenerative way of life.

In 2003, La Cité launched a daughter community in Colebrook, New Hampshire, and Kheops International became a major distributor in its field. In the late 2000s, La Cité connected with the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), GENNA (GEN-North America), and the Ecovillage Network of Canada, hosting the annual meeting of the latter organization in 2011. In 2015 the community offered their first residential Ecovillage Design Education (EDE) course designed by GEN International and Gaia Education. Now La Cité has its own ecovillage learning center, CAP Eco-Community.

Enright Ridge strikes me as a unique and successful urban ecovillage, with access to nature and trees, fresh organic produce, and community gathering centers and opportunities for fun activities and social connection. And La Cité seems like a unique and successful rural ecovillage, with spiritually-oriented members and even more access to nature and trees, fresh organic produce, and community gathering centers and opportunities for enjoyable activities and social connection.

In *Creating an Urban Ecovillage* Jim Schenk describe how he and his wife Eileen and their neighbors began developing Enright Ridge in 2004 and its evolution over the years since then. He offers an account of what happened when, including chapters on organizational structure, self-governance, and conflict, as well as chapters on specific aspects of community life, such as simple living, friendships, food, housing, children, play, and elders, and sections highlighting individual ecovillage members and their relationships to these topics. The last chapter offers practical steps for readers who want to start their own urban retrofit ecovillage. Enright Ridge was founded on the principles of honoring the Earth and Earth restoration, which Jim sees as particularly important for cities, and this is his perspective throughout the book.

In *Tales from an Ecovillage* Andrée Robert vividly describes the La Cité Écologique's first summer on the property, with all 40 families working long hours to establish the school for their children, build housing for everyone and their large barn-like community building, and start up their first businesses. Now with her children and grandchildren in the ecovillage, Andrée looks back on the triumphs and challenges of La Cité over the decades, writing a kind of love letter about her community. La Cité was founded on spiritual principles, including the principle of respect—respect for Nature, for each other, and for all people—and this is her perspective throughout the book.

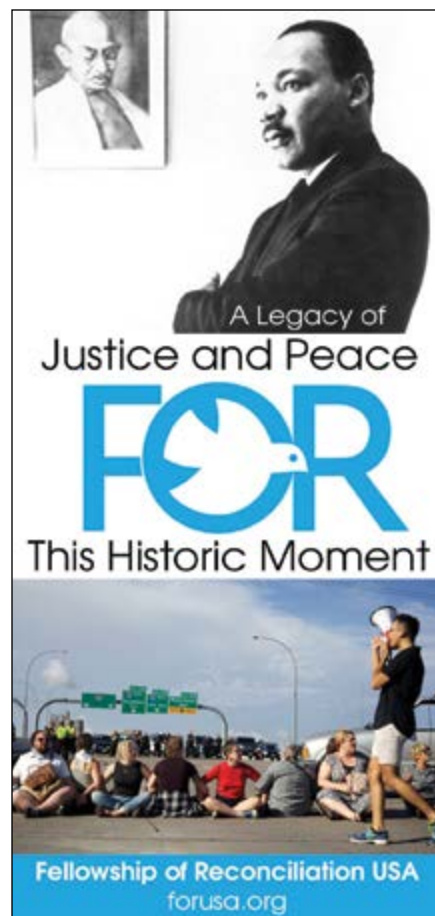
Both authors include their community's major challenges and conflicts. Jim describes two wrenching conflicts, including accusations against him personally and how those were resolved, and a kind of "hostile takeover" of Enright Ecovillage organized by some newer members years later, and what some of the other members did about it. Andrée describes the crushing events starting in 1988 when disgruntled, possibly misinformed departing members spread dreadful lies about La Cité, how the community lost all its businesses and most of its property as a result, was finally fully exonerated a few years later, and how they worked around the clock with three shifts doing sewing piecework for another company

to pay off their debts and finally buy their property back.

I highly recommend both *Creating an Urban Ecovillage* and *Tales from an Ecovillage* for anyone who wants to learn more about how people found successful communities—and who could also benefit from cautionary tales about what can go wrong and what groups can do to resolve or prevent such challenges. But mostly I recommend these books for the inspiration they provide from the remarkable achievements of each group. 🌱

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

### GEN-US.NET/COMMUNITIES





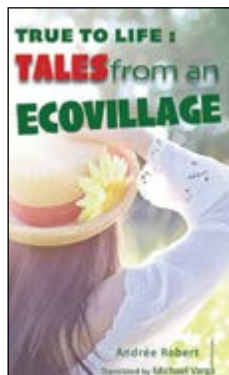
# Ecovillage Tales



## Creating an Urban Ecovillage: A Model for Revitalizing Our Cities

*Jim Schenk*

Pine Run Press, Spooner, Wisconsin, 2023, 175 pages.



## True to Life: Tales from an Ecovillage

*Andrée Robert*

Independently published, 2021, 132 pages.

As a student of how people create successful new intentional communities—which is why I wrote *Creating a Life Together*—I'm drawn to “how we did it” stories by community founders. So I dove right in to *Creating an Urban Ecovillage: A Model for Revitalizing Our Cities*, about Enright Ridge Urban Ecovillage in Cincinnati, and *True to Life: Tales from an Ecovillage*, about La Cité Écologique in Quebec.

Both are short books by community cofounders devoted to their communities. I've met both authors, Jim Schenk, who with his wife Eileen Schenk cofounded Enright Ridge in 2004, and Andrée Robert, who was with the 40 cofounding families of La Cité in 1984, led by spiritual teacher and environmental educator Michael Deunov. I've been to each ecovillage several times and was impressed by the successes, innovations, and welcoming energy of each community.

These groups represent what you could call the two ends of a spectrum of ecovillages in North America. Enright Ridge is a smaller, newer, urban, secular, community in the US; La Cité is a large, rural, spiritually-oriented community in Canada. Enright Ridge has an independent-income economy, meaning community members earn a living in various ways and control their own finances; La Cité has an income-sharing economy, meaning members work in community businesses with the income going to the community.

Like Los Angeles Eco-Village, Enright Ridge is comprised of neighbors already living in the area and those who have moved there to participate in the community. Enright Ridge members live in about one-third of the 1900s-1930s-era houses on huge lots along Enright Ridge in the working-class neighborhood of Price Hill in Cincinnati. (I'm familiar with three other urban retrofit communities: Los Angeles Eco-Village, comprised of neighbors in two adjacent apartment buildings and a four-plex in downtown Los Angeles; Genesee Gardens Cohousing, on a cul-de-sac street in Lansing, Michigan; and N St. Cohousing in Davis, California,

with members living in almost all houses around a city block and in some others nearby.)

The part of Enright Ridge Street where the ecovillage is centered is a three-quarter mile cul-de-sac street surrounded by woods, a serendipitous community-like site plan that encourages a tighter and more cohesive group than neighbors living on city blocks. The back yards border the woods, and community members built a trail through the woods behind all the yards on both sides of the street. In recent years people have also moved to nearby streets to be a part of the community.

The *de facto* community center and start of Enright Ridge's development is the Imago Earth Center, a 47-acre nature preserve and ecological educational nonprofit started by Jim and Eileen Schenk in 2004. Enright Ridge CSA Farm, located in 10 different ecovillage backyards, was created five years later and is run by a group of neighbors and others. With experience managing nonprofits and rehabbing old houses, Jim was able to buy foreclosed houses along Enright Avenue for the ecovillage project in partnership with a nonprofit organization and with outside funding help, to remodel the houses and put them on the market, advertising them specifically to potential ecovillage members—which as far as I know is unique in urban retrofit projects. Thus affordable new housing was made available to potential new ecovillage members, with prices ranging from \$60,000 to \$100,000, the average being from \$75,000 to \$85,000. This low-cost remodeled housing attracted new ecovillage neighbors, improved neighborhood aesthetics, and raised property values for everyone.

In 2010 in this same way the ecovillage bought a five-unit apartment building above a retail store; the store area is now rented by the local Zen Center. In 2016 they bought the noisy corner bar—then an undesirable drug hangout where Enright Ridge intersects the cross street at the beginning of the cul-de-sac neighborhood. Now it's a family-friendly pub serving snacks, wine, and beer; host-

(continued on p. 63)



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Our mission at *Utne Reader* is to search high and low for new ideas and fresh perspectives that aim to start conversations and cure ignorance. To that end, COMMUNITIES has become one of our go-to sources for thought-provoking pieces about people

opting out of the rat race and living life on their own terms. We're pleased to share the voices we come across in COMMUNITIES with our readers because they remind us all of the virtue of cooperation and the world-changing potential of coexistence.

—Christian Williams, Editor, *Utne Reader*

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

—Murphy Robinson, Founder of Mountainsong Expeditions

Community has to be the future if we are to survive. COMMUNITIES plays such a critical role in moving this bit of necessary culture change along. Thank you COMMUNITIES for beating the drum and helping us see.

—Chuck Durrett, The Cohousing Company

COMMUNITIES mentors me with real human stories and practical tools: networking, research, and decades of archives that nourish, support, and encourage evolving wholesome collaborations. The spirit and writings have helped guide me to recognize and contribute to quality community experiences wherever I am. The magazine is an irreplaceable resource and stimulus during the times when community disappears and isolation/withdrawal looms; and an inspiration and morale booster when I am once again engaged with intentional and committed group work.

—Shen Pauley, reader and author, Barre, Massachusetts

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**Bonus:** every subscription, print + digital or digital only, also includes **access to all digital back and current issues** for online viewing and/or download.



## WELCOME NEW WORLDWIDE READERS

With this issue, we continue to welcome more readers—many of them international, receiving the digital edition. Benefactor support has allowed us to offer several hundred complimentary digital subscriptions to new subscribers; to distribute those, we've partnered with a number of allied organizations around the world to encourage support for those groups as well.

These groups include:

- Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), the ecovillage movement's international hub: [ecovillage.org](http://ecovillage.org)

plus GEN's regional networks and nodes:

- GEN Africa: [ecovillage.org/region/gen-africa](http://ecovillage.org/region/gen-africa)
- GEN Europe: [ecovillage.org/region/gen-europe](http://ecovillage.org/region/gen-europe)
- CASA (Council of Sustainable Settlements of Latin America): [ecovillage.org/region/casa](http://ecovillage.org/region/casa)
- GENOA (Global Ecovillage Network Oceania & Asia): [ecovillage.org/region/genoa](http://ecovillage.org/region/genoa)
- NextGEN (Youth Network): [nextgen-ecovillage.org](http://nextgen-ecovillage.org)

plus another worldwide network:

- ICSA (International Communal Studies Association): [icsacommunity.org](http://icsacommunity.org)

As mentioned in the two previous issues, we have also worked closely with US-based groups to distribute benefactor-supported print-plus-digital subscriptions to intentional communities in the United States; in particular:

- FIC (Foundation for Intentional Community): [ic.org](http://ic.org)
- CohoUS (Cohousing Association of the United States): [cohousing.org](http://cohousing.org)

And we've found allies in this work in another related group:

- CSA (Communal Studies Association): [communalstudies.org](http://communalstudies.org)

We hope to draw in not only more readers, but also more contributors, through these networks. If you're a first-time reader of COMMUNITIES, we encourage you to consider writing for the magazine as well (see [gen-us.net/submit](http://gen-us.net/submit) for details). COMMUNITIES fulfills its mission best when many, diverse voices share in its pages.

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