

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY, ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, AND ICS

# COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

Winter 2025 • Issue #209

\$10 US / \$15 Canada

## Community or Dystopia?

**The Algorithm Blues: Going Nuclear**  
**Code, Care, and Regeneration • AI and Civilization's Collapse**  
**Goodbye, Techno-Utopia • Screens Between Us**



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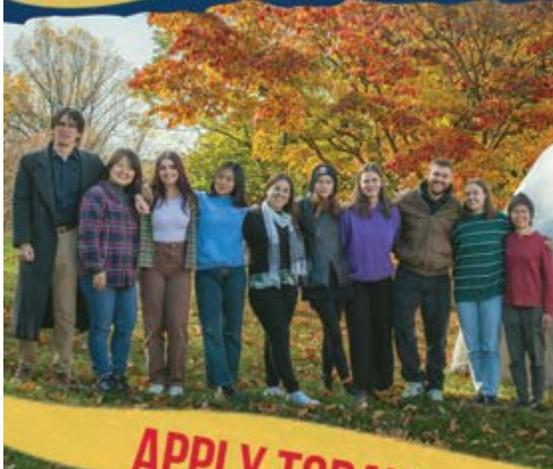
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# Community or Dystopia?

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 No digital tool can replace the smell of fresh-baked bread at a potluck or the feeling of hands in the soil. But it can make those moments easier to find, and it can strengthen the invisible threads tying our communities together.

*Digital-Only (see [gen-us.net/frenemy](http://gen-us.net/frenemy)):*

- 65 My Frenemy, AI**  
**Elizabeth Barr**  
 When AI easily provides me with instant summaries of years of research on any topic, or with detailed instructions for any project, my adult-self who’s in a hurry does appreciate it. Reframed, though, that same moment also seems like an overly helpful helicopter parent stealing a learning opportunity.

## ON THE COVER



A path through a flowering rapeseed field leads to Dukovany Nuclear Power Station in the Czech Republic. The path through a flowering AI field may lead to many more such stations. (See especially “The Algorithm Blues: Going Nuclear” by Albert Bates, page 20.) Photo by Daniel Prudek.

# COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

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**COMMUNITIES** (ISSN 0199-9346) is published quarterly by the Global Ecovillage Network—United States (GEN-US) at 4712 W. 10th Ave, Denver CO 80204. Postmaster: Send address changes to *Communities*, 81868 Lost Valley Ln, Dexter OR 97431. Indexed in the Alternative Press Index.

**SUBSCRIPTIONS:** \$30 US, \$40 outside US for four issues via periodical/surface mail. Supporters add \$10 per year; Sustainers add \$20 per year. Digital-only subscriptions cost \$10 less. Single copies are \$10 postpaid US, \$15 postpaid Canada, \$20 postpaid other international. All payments in US dollars. Available from *Communities*, c/o 330 Morgan St., Oberlin, OH 44074; [order@gen-us.net](mailto:order@gen-us.net); 541-937-5221 for more info. (please leave message); [gen-us.net/subscribe](http://gen-us.net/subscribe).

**BACK ISSUES:** *Communities*, c/o 330 Morgan St., Oberlin, OH 44074; [order@gen-us.net](mailto:order@gen-us.net); 541-937-5221 for more info. (please leave message); [gen-us.net/back-issues](http://gen-us.net/back-issues).

**BACK ISSUE CONTENT:** See complete back issue article index at [gen-us.net/index](http://gen-us.net/index), and index by community at [gen-us.net/index-by-community](http://gen-us.net/index-by-community). See back issue themes at [gen-us.net/themes](http://gen-us.net/themes).

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**GLOBAL ECOVILLAGE NETWORK—UNITED STATES:** GEN-US, attn.: *Communities*, 4712 W. 10th Ave, Denver CO 80204.; [admin@gen-us.net](mailto:admin@gen-us.net); 541-937-5221 (please leave message); [gen-us.net](http://gen-us.net).

**ADVERTISING:** Joyce Bressler, *Communities* Advertising Manager, [ads@gen-us.net](mailto:ads@gen-us.net); 845-558-4492.

**WEBSITE:** [gen-us.net/communities](http://gen-us.net/communities).

This magazine printed by Sundance Press, Tucson AZ.



## About the USI Center for Communal Studies

The Center for Communal Studies promotes the study of contemporary and historic communal groups, intentional communities and utopias. Established in 1976 at University of Southern Indiana, the Center encourages and facilitates meetings, classes, scholarship, networking and public interest in communal groups past and present, here and abroad.



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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 seek contributions 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.

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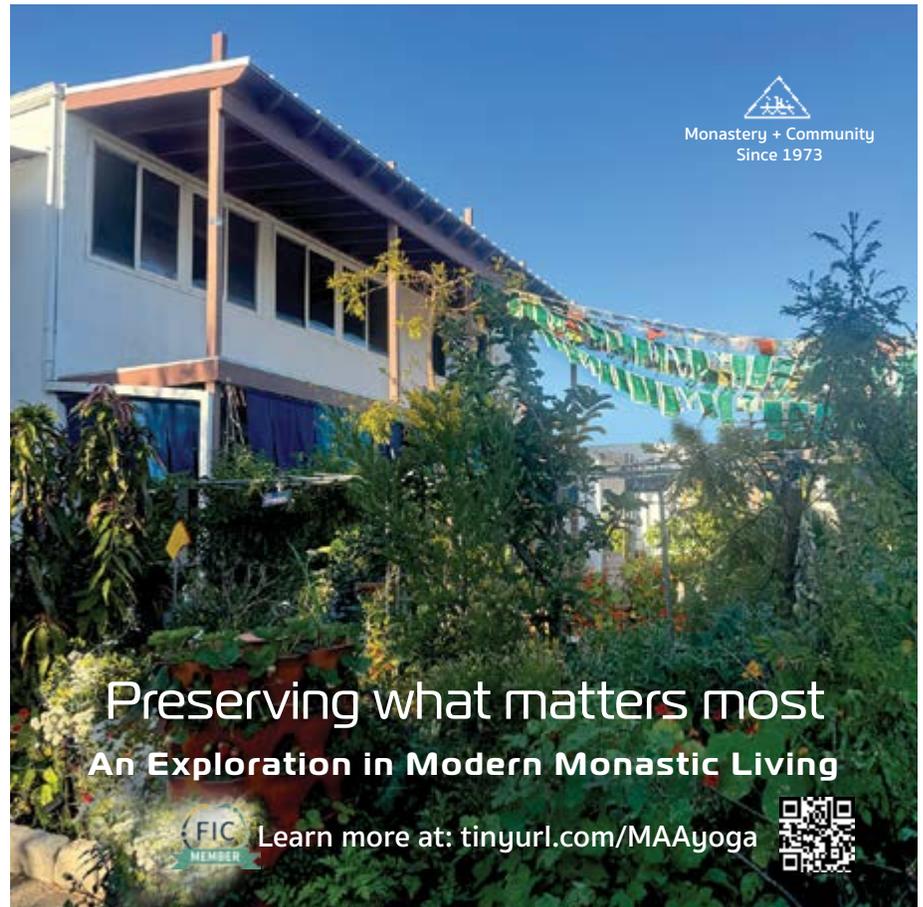
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## What is an “Intentional Community”?

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.



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# The Air Is Fine! (Or Is It?)

**M**y eyes sting, everything has taken on a slight orange hue, and breathing has become more difficult and unpleasant as diffuse wildfire smoke reaches us in our valley. My body wants to get to cleaner air; that probably involves heading toward the coast. My fellow community member N has the same idea. I look online: the website [map.purpleair.com](http://map.purpleair.com) accurately tells us that the AQI (US EPA PM2.5 air quality index) in our area is in the mid-to-high 100s, indicating that sensitive individuals may experience health effects. Curious what it will say, N then asks AI how the air is here in Dexter. “Air quality in Dexter, Oregon is **good** right now,” comes the response, followed by a paragraph describing all the ways in which that supposedly unpolluted air is not a risk to health.

Ironically, N’s simple search for an answer—one that our senses as well as actual AQI readings immediately tell us is dramatically wrong—inadvertently contributes to air pollution elsewhere. As detailed in several articles in this issue, AI-assisted searches require exponentially more energy and resource use (by a factor of 10 or higher) than conventional online searches, and fuel the proliferation of data centers that foul local environments and communities—often far away from the people enlisting AI’s services. As Ben Brownlow points out in our lead piece, “Elon Musk’s Grok AI super-facility sucks the groundwater and fills the sky with exhaust, corroding the communities surrounding it near Memphis, Tennessee.” This reality unfortunately hits very close to home for another community member, whose friends and relatives in Tennessee are actively suffering significant health impacts resulting from N’s request for AI assistance combined with the millions more like it that will happen before either of us can get a good breath of better-quality air.

Even when AI gives accurate answers, it comes with those same costs. Yet it seems that some people—communitarians and non-communitarians alike—elevate it to almost godlike status, both trusting its answers and ignoring its collateral damage. Substantial parts of the population appear to accept it uncritically, even as others have misgivings. And its problematic ethical dimensions go far beyond its high energy demand and its impacts on ecosystems and quality of physical life (including air, water, land, sustenance) for populations that, disproportionately, are already marginalized and trod upon by the modern world. “Move fast and break things” is Silicon Valley’s creed, and it seems to have reached its apotheosis in the development of AI—in its creators’ disregard of the consequences of their choices, and in their rush to outcompete everyone else in advancing the technology, even if it means throwing caution to the wind (along with much particulate matter, especially in the vicinity of sprawling data centers).

• • •

**A**s I watch AI being promoted and in some cases essentially forced on users of other digital products, often presented as the miracle solution to all that ails us, I

can’t help but think about how chemical agriculture was presented to, sold to, and often also (via concerted economic pressure and sabotage of alternatives) forced upon farmers in this country and worldwide. The end result has been poisoned and depleted soils, widespread loss of biodiversity, concentration of wealth into fewer and fewer hands, and devastation and depletion of the farming population as farms needed to get larger to have any chance to survive. (“Get big or get out!” was the US Department of Agriculture’s mantra starting in the Nixon administration, and most policies since then have only reinforced it.) Consolidation, homogenization, damaged ecosystems, and poverty of nutrition are the legacy of the chemical agriculture revolution. The same threatens to happen on a cultural level with the artificial intelligence revolution, which has many of the same and analogous effects on us and the physical world. Yet, like chemical agriculture, it is depicted as what will save us from our current challenges.

AI’s genesis and spread also bears disturbing resemblances to colonialism; among those who look closely, it has become the poster child of cultural, intellectual, linguistic, and resource appropriation. “Everything it sees, it claims ownership of, and resells,” is often not much of an oversimplification. It trains on pirated material, assuming for itself the work of millions of people (writers, artists, scientists, researchers, scholars, and more) who will not be compensated for its absorption and regurgitation of their efforts—which now profit

AI's investors, not the original creators. It replaces a more democratic, people-centered and -generated library of knowledge and cultural resources, and all the exchanges and relationships associated with that library's creation, with its own version—using various means, both overbearing and subtle, to funnel attention and profits to itself. In its most virulent form, it steals not only past work but present jobs, exploits whatever it can to achieve its ends, and seems to have no ethical or moral compass. It excels at amassing resources for a few, forcing itself on people, making other options more difficult to access, overwhelming by its omnipresence, and marginalizing those who don't get with the program.

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One thing I enjoy most about reading communications within an intentional community—whether they're internal notices, meeting notes, or public newsletters—is seeing the individual personalities expressed within them, each unique. I tend to read them to learn not only about their nominal contents, but about the human beings who created them, to appreciate their diverse means of expression, their personality quirks, their own forms of charm, humor, and seriousness, the ways they think and feel, the distinctive fonts and text color they may choose. Even a message about the driest subject matter can contain clues to the world of the person who documented it.

Yet more and more frequently, AI is being enlisted to “save time” and “make things easier and more consistent,” in the process also robbing these communications of the very things that make them pleasurable to read, the humanity that created them. Instead, we are increasingly awash in flat, predictably formatted, formulaic, robotic messages—all the more painful to read when they transparently simulate (and fall flat on) coming from an actual person. As machines take over our communications and are enlisted to represent us, who do we become? How do we relate to one another when we are just a collection of avatars, increasingly fine-tuned—although sometimes embarrassingly muddled and turned into word

salad—by AI? What remains of us when we no longer form our own thoughts, feelings, insights, intuitions into our own words, and when even our art is computer-generated?

I far prefer the journey of imperfect, distinctive, idiosyncratic, authentic human communication to the destination of sanitized, perfectly character-less, cyber-generated communication. In that same way, to return to farming and gardening (I highly recommend it), I would always choose the diversity of organically and regeneratively-raised produce to be had at a local farmers' market—even if some of it is misshapen, unfamiliar, not-by-the-book, and/or accompanied by cryptic wisecracks from the farmer—to the monotony of industrial, chemically-raised produce from a supermarket.

Likewise, just as Big Ag constricts options not only in the present but in the future (including through consolidated seed companies that discontinue heirloom and open-pollinated varieties in favor of fewer, uniform, patented hybrids and GMOs), Big Tech, through tools such as AI, also threatens to diminish future intellectual and creative possibilities by constructing a homogenizing bottleneck in the present. It does this by encouraging tech-reliance, dependency, and attrition of our own capacities in favor of the ease of instant answers—effort we no longer need to make, thinking that we no longer need to do.

A few questions worth considering: Even when AI comes up with apparently cogent answers, might the data set its evident omniscience is based on be the same data set, the same deep-seated assumptions, that got us into our current global pickle? Or more perniciously, might it even be a deliberately distorted data set serving a particular political/economic agenda? (See Albert Bates' exploration of this in “The Algorithm Blues.”) And might we be prone to surrendering our personal agency to AI in the same way that some of our ancestors (and contemporaries too) have surrendered it to their ideas of “God,” or to political leaders who are “right about everything”?

Is AI helping us all to “grow up”? Or are we reenacting a childhood need for security, searching for a parent who will make everything right? Can this parent be relied upon? Or is it a mirage?

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In preparation for this issue, wanting to understand better the effects of AI and Big Tech, I started reading articles about them that I came across, compiling the links into a list for future reference. AI's potential impacts soon began to seem overwhelming in scope. I found it helpful—though only a little—to organize the articles into categories: Environmental and Social Costs, Resource Extraction and Wealth Concen-



Photos by Chris Roth



tration; Competition, Force-Feeding, Dehumanizing; Theft from Creators, Job Loss; Impacts on Thinking, Writing, Education, Work; Contributions to Accelerated Pace of Life, Stupidity, Loneliness; Information Control, Power Consolidation, Surveillance, Oppression; Apocalyptic Scenarios, Future Possibilities, Weaponization; AI as Religion; and (perhaps most promising, after all that) Not Living Up to the Hype.

While not all intentional communities are equally conscious about their food choices, it is easy to find communities that are committed to producing and consuming food grown with organic, regenerative practices, that essentially boycott Big Ag in order to support and participate in an alternative instead. A similar ethical lens applies to many other areas of community life—groups, especially values-driven groups, often strive to develop a keen awareness of the ecological, environmental-justice, and social impacts of their daily choices, and to take actions that align with their values, that represent the world they would like to help usher into being. Not everyone will agree, and some group members will be more hard-core than others, but “drawing the line,” at least *somewhere* (for example, no disposable water bottles at group events; no commercial television blaring in the main lodge; no fast food served in throwaway containers for dinner), is the norm rather than the exception.

This same kind of communal insistence on an ethical, bigger-picture lens has lagged in relation to digital technologies, which have taken over our world and become inescapable today even more than the products of Big Ag. It is certainly easier to grow your own garden than to find substitutes for all the ways we now depend on digital technology. (Most of us use at least some digital and online tools; for creating and distributing this magazine, they’ve become essential.) Yet AI, with its exponentially larger impacts, has upped the game. Within the last few months, I have become unable to open up pdfs of the latest article or issue layouts to proofread without having the text space cut into by the less-than-helpful message, “This appears to be a long document. Save time by reading a summary,” followed by a link to “Generative AI User Guidelines” and by an “AI Assistant” that sometimes occupies a third of my screen. There’s no universal setting to disable those; each time, I need to click on an “X” or two to proceed.

• • •

As annoying as much of this is, and despite the dismay and even outrage it is easy to feel when reading about what’s “behind the curtain” of AI, things are al-

most never as black-and-white as strong expressions of opinion might imply. Articles in a separate category on my list document “Possible Benefits”—and there are some notable ones, in targeted applications.

I read about AI-guided robot weeders that could replace chemical herbicides on a massive scale; a research project to use AI to decipher dolphin language; potential medical applications, from diagnosis to finding cures for currently untreatable diseases using drugs we already have; an effort to use AI to revive a nearly-extinct native language; ways that AI can assist some handicapped populations. In these cases AI may assume an entirely different role than simply being a crutch, a substitute for real human effort. Here, its deployment appears to be more noble than exploitive in motivation—and plausibly, at least when considered in isolation, a “net positive.”

When it comes to AI and digital tools more generally, how are we to distinguish the frivolous, the corrosive, and the dangerous from that which may be worth the impacts, and truly helpful? And is “the truly helpful” something we can count on into the future, or are we indeed headed for a collapse in which all of these tools that we have come increasingly to rely upon disappear, leaving us to fend for ourselves without them? These are the kinds of questions people in community are well-positioned to discuss—not in online flame-out sessions, but face-to-face.

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To issue a blanket condemnation of all digital technologies in the pages of this magazine would be akin to taking a private vehicle on a nationwide road trip to speak on local radio and television stations in protest of the existence of private vehicles, roads, radios, and televisions. It could be done, but it might not be convincing.

Instead, anyone writing for or reading COMMUNITIES likely occupies some middle ground—willing and wanting to engage in the world we currently exist in, to recognize the nuances and paradoxes, contradictions in our own lives, the tightrope walk between attempting

to adhere to strongly-held but perhaps overly-rigid values, and compromising those values, possibly too much, in the interests of survival (an important element of survival being our ability to cooperate and in some way fit in with diverse others who may see certain things quite differently).

If I were to rephrase this issue's theme, it would be **Community AND DystopAIa**, because it's obvious that information technology has a major role to play in community life and in the communities movement today. Its uses and benefits feature in many of the articles herein—along with the down-sides of overuse. No one decrying the omnipresence of screens in this issue actually boycotts screens entirely; and most of AI's greatest skeptics herein seem to have chosen to engage at least in a limited way with AI even after recognizing its resource and other impacts. Whereas I myself haven't done that, I also didn't turn down the several instances of AI-generated graphics submitted, nor the one partially AI-generated article, which a hard-line purist might have. And we also include a number of "pro-AI" stories, which, while sometimes acknowledging reasons for caution, present AI breakthroughs as overall a good thing for community, humanity, and the world. Anyone looking for a "party line" will need to look elsewhere. We each contain multitudes—as does this issue.

No matter how clearly we may see things through our own individual lenses, I believe every other lens is worth looking through, to weigh how it can inform our own understanding and choices, and to help us engage in the conversations we need to have about the role of digital tools in our lives. Hopefully we can do that with compassion and caring, rather than by "moving fast and breaking things" (including relationships) whether that's through unbridled techno-optimism or through a techno-pessimism that prevents us from stepping, even for a moment, into one another's (virtual) shoes. 🐾

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*Chris Roth (editor@gen-us.net) edits*  
COMMUNITIES.

## Further Reading

(clickable hyperlinks also available online at [gen-us.net/air](http://gen-us.net/air))

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# Goodbye, Techno-Utopia

*By Ben Brownlow*

*The future ain't what it used to be.*

—Yogi Berra

Sitting inside and writing at a laptop on one of these rare, first days of cool weather, when the summer sun shrinks its loop from horizon to horizon in anticipation of autumn and the tall-grass prairies surrounding Dancing Rabbit transition from bloom to seed, is perhaps indicative of my relationship with technology. This inert amalgamation of glass, plastic, silica, and rare-earth minerals often serves to keep me in a state of myopia when there is a living, thrumming world to inhabit out there. But writing (partially) pays my bills, so until clay tablets return to the forefront of media, I spend some hours a week grappling with technologies I am helpless to understand, instead of frolicking with the monarchs and spicebush swallow-tails that dance from bloom to leaf out in the beebalm breeze.

It isn't that I'm opposed to all technology. I certainly enjoy blades, wedges, levers, and ramps. And while moving parts can add an amount of needless complexity to my life, I am still appreciative of wheels, bearings, and hinges too. Even a simple 12 volt DC circuit, which can be understood and reckoned with by an elementary-school-aged child, has been known to bring an acceptable balance of convenience and simplicity into my life. Even though I prefer to live in a world where I can fix or create the technologies I utilize, living in community allows for some division of labor and specialization, which gives me access to other technologies I'm not interested in learning about, like vehicle maintenance, Excel spreadsheets, and modern plumbing.

It is this level of technology—that is, community-scaled tech-

nology—that I would contend is the farthest down the road of “Techno-Utopia” I’d prefer to travel. In the late 1990s when Dancing Rabbit was first established, our founders—young, computer-y Stanford kids—were very much a part of the rising wave of digital settlers. I distinguish this from the earlier pioneers who invented the stuff. I think of our founders as claim-jumpers of a sort, arriving upon the blank map of the early internet simultaneously with their arrival in Northeast Missouri—a place which is very clearly not Silicon Valley. Early members ran a web-hosting service which helped to fund an income-sharing cohousing development.

These were in those days when Bay Area counterculture had one foot in the early internet, and the other one probably kicking a hacky sack. There was a great deal of optimism among this generation of enthusiastic cyber-Deadheads about what the world could look like with this new network of connection spread over it—what ideas could be shared, what problems could be solved, how cultures could collaborate. It was natural, in those Clinton-era days, that intelligent, idealistic, optimistic people would take their skills in guiding others through this new network of information to remote, rural communities where they could build something bigger—a different sort of settlement—all the while garnering some necessary income from remote IT work.

A quarter of a century later, the landscape is unrecognizable, and I would contend, clearly not a techno-utopia. Damned bleak

even. The kinds of work that many Rabbits relied on or were encouraged to pursue is being replaced by AI. The data centers being constructed for this technology are the complete opposite of an ecovillage: utterly dystopic hellscape which parasitize communities, where groundwater is extracted from the soil to cool massive computer processors that hold data—the abstract lifeblood of our digital selves, taken freely—leveraged by tech corporations to market products to the dwindling amount of humans with the disposable income to spend on them.

It isn’t a new story. A technology, capability, or idea becomes profitable, and those with the greatest power seize it and extract from it all they can, for as long as it lasts. By the time the general public comes to realize that they’re not actually invited to join in on the well-marketed journey of progress that was sold to them, it’s too late: the profit has been wrung out from the host community which provided the water to cool the supercomputers and the atmosphere to hold the pollution generated by massive power generators, and the men responsible are already setting new conquests, perhaps on other exploitable planets. It is not necessarily the tool itself that is bad for communities (intentional or otherwise), but the amalgamation of power, extraction, and exploitation required to produce it.

But the tools themselves, like all tools, are capable of harm. As a farmer and orchardist, I have done many wonderful things with shovels, and I have also done a few harmful things, unintentionally. I have planted acres of food-producing trees that



Photos courtesy of Ben Brownlow



enhance our habitat, and I have killed a few toads, snakes, and even salamanders unintentionally in the process. What's nice about a shovel, or even something more capable of ecological disturbance, like say a chainsaw or a tractor, is that the harmful use of these instruments isn't purposely designed to be addictive, whereas phones that buzz and flash and flood our senses like pocket-sized slot machines are very much designed with addiction in mind.

Like chainsaws, digital tools are exceedingly good for some specific kinds of work, but not everything. For example—and this will probably always be one of my biggest complaints about Dancing Rabbit—our email “all-list.” Sending an email to the all-list is fine in regards to an event, an offer, a notification, or anything that does not require the things I value in deeper communication, like nuance, tone, or body language. Having a shared digital calendar for smooth scheduling of our vehicle co-op works well, and I'll admit that I was part of the two- or three-person group that wanted to keep it a pencil-based paper calendar at the time. But I have never seen an emotional email sent to the all-list go over well.

The all-list isn't just a difficult space for public emotional processing—but a horrible place for humor as well. It isn't that these digital tools are merely ineffective at conveying this higher strata of human expression, but that they replace the opportunity to experience them in person, one of the more important aspects of community. It also adds to information overwhelm—my inbox is currently at 26,000-something emails, and I largely blame my comrades for this. I mean, I do it too—but historically speaking, I'm pretty sure nobody has ever found a lost item requested on the all-list.

Then, there's the surveillance. An activism-oriented commu-

nity, or at least a community with some participating activists, can be put at a potential risk by having a few dozen interconnected recording devices on the premises, linking individuals by physical proximity. If our current and potential final executive administration here in the US can carry out the sort of broad abuses of power against people who have not committed a crime in broad daylight, as they have been doing through their suspension of habeus corpus under the guise of Homeland Security, then it can easily happen in your community as well. We now live in an age in which we are never truly alone, despite the clawing specter of isolation which so many feel.

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**I**n a community with a high turnover rate like Dancing Rabbit, things can change pretty quickly. We used to have a culture where everyone made money online and yet a screen could not be seen in public, outside of our Computer Lab. Now I see them everywhere, even in my own hands, but the money is moving in a different direction. I'm 40 years old. I didn't grow up with the internet in my home, though some of my friends did. It was very slow at the time, and didn't really do anything that a kid would appreciate, so we went outside to play most days. Kids these days (and I understand how I sound when I use those words) just don't seem to have the same commitment to physical play and exploration as I had—the competition for attention between the casino screens and the butterflies is lopsided, to say the least. But it hasn't stopped with the kids. People of all ages who are nominally seeking community show up here physically, and yet I fail to see them show up here. I can offer a bit of speculation every bit as accurate as a Language Learning Model as to why.

I think COVID-19, as a global event, fried a lot of peoples' brains—in addition to all the physical harm and death it inflicted. The amount of time people spent online during lockdown has led to a secondary, social-cognitive pandemic which we will see the reverberations from for a long time. Humans, necessarily social creatures, lost access to connection—many at a key time for emotional development. They both feel an instinctual desire for in-person community, and perhaps lack the skills necessary to participate in it.

2020 was a challenging year for our community, as it was for many others. Canceled potlucks, unbearable decision-making meetings held over Zoom where subtle emotional/body cues couldn't be easily noted, and division rooted in isolation all threatened our fabric of intention and mutualized survival. But I'm beginning to understand that we were perhaps spared the brunt of it, as we now integrate folks who spent formative time in that great, strange social void. If the 1990s and 2000s were the golden era of our visioning of a digital utopia, and the 2010s were the development of this utopia's economic functions, then it may well be that the 2020s are when the first slums began to form around the edges of this tarnished dream.

The problem, of course, is that if something goes amiss on the internet—if it begins to turn against humanity, threaten our physical and mental well-being—it happens everywhere. It hap-

pens here. Sometimes I make an announcement—via email—suggesting a potentially connecting nature activity. Perhaps a dragonfly-viewing event, a birding expedition, or a tree-care party. Few ever show up, and they're usually the same people. Where is everybody? Sure, some of them are legitimately busy (and not everybody enjoys getting ticks as much as I do), but I have the sneaking suspicion that many of us are increasingly trapped online—even in an “intentional” community.

While Elon Musk's Grok AI super-facility sucks the groundwater and fills the sky with exhaust, corroding the communities surrounding it near Memphis, Tennessee, the reach of his technologies (and those of men like him) cut deeper into other communities—even intentional ones—to further extract and monetize them, until the mere husk remains. The digital culture that techno-optimists once believed would unite our global citizenry has instead become a hegemony of consumerism, and a schismatic rupture between echo chambers at best. And we cannot put this beast back in the box.

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As I said, it's bleak y'all. So in the process of typing this up, I shut my laptop, and head out to wander with my dog in the buzz and song of late summer. Goldenrods have just begun to burst out along the sun-drenched draws, and swallows dive and careen through the air thick with the wailing rounds of cicada song. Our cattle are tromping through the tall-grass, their mouths stained with chlorophyll as they strip the tender leaves from thick-stalked late season grass, the network of roots responding unseen, exuding sugars that feed a thriving settlement of bacteria and fungi, flagellates and nematodes all the way up to higher invertebrates and secretive voles that pounce and creep through the trampled thatch. Enzymes, nutrients, water, and solar energy are all exchanged in this underground web, for mutualized benefit—sun, seed, earth, and life. We are walking over a network of care, both symbiotic and decentralized—a world too complex to be “groked” by a super-processor, no matter how powerful. It's the first, and thus far the only successful techno-utopia.

I wonder how our networks for sharing resources and care can come to resemble this prairie dirt more than the convoluted and frightening world we've knit together with silicon, copper, and plastic. The rhizomatic network of our soil, when balanced, has no singular point of control. When one plant, one node of the network, fails or dies, the remaining balance of stored energy is shared or sequestered, and the world above ground continues to bloom and seed. If Google dies tomorrow, it takes two-thirds of the digital ecosystem with it—a precarious and overly simple structure for an ecosystem. Above ground, a prairie in late summer is a swarm of intentional interactions between bees and blooms and butterflies, each specific act a marriage of sun and seed which took millions of years to develop.

Perhaps technology, at its most functional, is the bee, and not the hive. Increasingly, at Dancing Rabbit and the rest of this world, I find ourselves attempting to capture the act of being human within digital communication—our email server

often becomes a home for content and conversation best held person-to-person, when it could simply stand like an attractive blossom, an invitation to a more intimate interaction out in the real, buzzing, humming world.

Of course there is one more key component in the functioning of a tall-grass prairie: prescribed burns. So to stretch a metaphor ever so slightly more—I wonder sometimes if the brambles and briars and invasive plants that loom ever closer from the edges of our buzzing, humming meadow aren't in need of a little intentional, creative destruction now and then. This could look like some basic norms and boundaries around device-use in designated common spaces, or even an attempt at a “zero email” day of the week.

These are small steps, and mostly centered on personal choice—the kinds of things that often feel meaningless in the face of such a vast and amorphous force. As an ecovillage that values radical divestment from destructive and extractive systems, I'm not sure how we've chosen to justify our use of global digital infrastructure over other forbidden technologies. But here we are—pack-hunting monkeys discovering all the ways we can use a stick. We can beat each other with it, or we can dibble seeds in the dirt, but it's now clear that we aren't going to put it back down. 🍌

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# Screens Between Us: Technology, Intimacy, and the Fight for Presence

By Kristina Jansen

## I. The Child and the Screen

The other afternoon, I watched my friend and her seven-year-old son sitting side by side, heads tilted toward a glowing screen. They were sipping ice water, giggling as they maneuvered their way through a *Sims*-like game together. It was sweet, almost old-fashioned in its intimacy. But I couldn't help noticing the irony: in a household where television is limited to a carefully curated and strictly rationed window, the screen had found another way in.

It made me think about my own childhood, which in many ways was looser: the television on most of the weekend, and often after school. I adored TV (still do if I'm honest). But there were also long stretches when no screen was available at all, and we were left to invent worlds out of boredom. I turned to books—used sci-fi paperbacks, or a certain dog-eared series about babysitters and best friends. I also remember being forbidden to read at certain points in my life, usually as a punishment or because someone thought I was disappearing too far into fiction. I suppose it was my own early version of screen overuse—the impulse to escape into stories when the real world felt too chaotic, too quiet, or too much.

As a young teenager, I was obsessed with dystopian fiction—1984, *Brave New World*, *Fahrenheit 451*. I even tried to memorize my childhood favorite, Scott O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, imagining I might one day need to hold it in my head in a book-burning world. That story—of a girl surviving in isolation, forging companionship with animals, and cultivating a wild, alert awareness of her surroundings—spoke directly to me. I no longer remember it word for word, but I do live with a huge white, wolf-like dog now, a quiet echo of the story I once carried.

It was during months spent on a sailboat as a child, far from land and far from TV signals, that my screen addiction was first broken. We had no access to television. I became a savvy card player, learned to bake in a gimbaled oven, and listened to novels read aloud until I could read them myself. On my first ocean crossing, we read *The Black Stallion* and *Heidi*—stories of orphans navigating hardship that sank deep into my young heart. On the next crossing, I was aged six or seven, and we read Agatha Christie mysteries together. My mother-figure, the closest I had to a mother at the time, would sketch the characters for me to color in. By the time we started reading *Sayonara* by James Michener on a sail from the Seychelles to Manila, I had learned to read ahead. I'd sneak off to continue the story on my own. What I gained was independence—but what I lost was the intimacy of sharing the story together.

That impulse—to lose myself in stories—has never left me. I see it now in my teenage son, in other kids, and even in myself when I drift into a social media scroll. The human hunger to disappear into narrative runs deep in all of us. But what are we giving up in return? What intimacy is lost when we choose the solitude of reading ahead alone, instead of lingering in the warmth of reading slowly, together?

## II. When the Village Glows Blue

Our screens offer more connection than ever—and less. Erik Davis, in his June

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Always tethered to a phone, a podcast, or some bit of noise, we lose our own internal silence. Without that silence, we can't check in with ourselves. That absence cuts us off not only from ourselves, but from each other.

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22, 2025 *Burning Shore* newsletter titled “The Wild Awake,”<sup>1</sup> writes about cultivating animist awareness in a posthuman world. His reflections sparked many of the thoughts that shaped this piece. He speaks of the land as alive, and of other-than-human beings as carriers of story and agency. Reading his words reminded me that something similar used to be more active in our day-to-day social lives: a sense of presence, imagination, shared story. That, too, feels like it’s slipping away more often than not.

Instead, we get flickers of attention. We live in what Sherry Turkle calls a state of being “alone together”<sup>2</sup>—each of us tethered to our own screens, trading full conversation for fragmented exchanges. Turkle urges us to *reclaim conversation*, not just as a way to talk, but as a social technology in its own right—one that builds empathy, trust, and intimacy. Without it, we risk becoming fluent in distraction, but illiterate in presence.

Turkle argues that while technology offers the illusion of connection, it paradoxically leads to a deeper sense of solitude and emotional isolation by replacing authentic human interaction with low-risk, always-available digital “companionship.” We expect more from our devices and less from each other, leading to a diminished capacity for empathy and genuine relationships—even as human-robot interactions grow more convincing.

I agree with Turkle’s sense that what’s especially dangerous is the loneliness of never truly being alone. Always tethered to a phone, a podcast, or some bit of noise, we lose our own internal silence. Without that silence, we can’t check in with ourselves. We lose track of how we’re feeling, what we need, who we are in that moment. And that absence cuts us off not only from ourselves, but from each other.

This is something I’ve been trying to work through, sometimes well, sometimes not so much. What I do know is this: when I’m overly tethered, I’m also terribly adrift.

Even in an intentional community of friends—like the one I live in—it’s hard sometimes to remain fully present. A screen in the room, even just a sports game, pulls attention like gravity. And without one-on-one conversations or

moments of shared quiet, I sometimes leave those evenings of “getting together” feeling more disconnected than when I arrived.

### III. Dystopias and Digital Displacement

This isn’t a new fear. Huxley warned us. So did Orwell. In *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury painted a world obsessed with screens, numbed by entertainment, and allergic to reflection. Neil Postman, writing in 1985, observed that we were “amusing ourselves to death”<sup>3</sup>—not crushed by oppression but lulled into passivity. He saw it coming: the way news, politics, even education would become entertainment, trivializing public life and making us indifferent to the erosion of meaning.

And then there’s the brilliant, animated film, *WALL-E*,<sup>4</sup> released just a year after Facebook began its rise. In one particularly striking scene, the clunky robot WALL-E accidentally tips a passenger out of his hover chair. For the first time, the man sees the world around him. He looks around and realizes there’s a pool, that there are other people, that he’s been living among strangers while thinking he was connected. It’s a jarring moment of awakening. The same happens to a woman nearby. They look at each other. And the spark of human longing ignites.

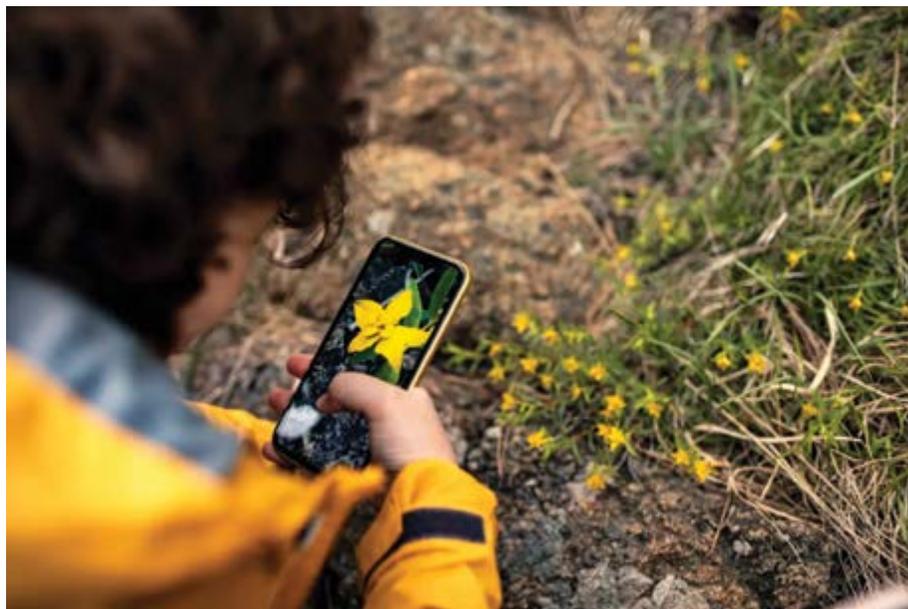
### IV. Community in the Glow of the Algorithm

Here’s what I’ve come to believe: presence is a social technology. It’s a skill, a habit, a muscle: looking someone in the eyes; noticing how you feel around them; checking in with yourself, even in a group. This ability to track our own emotional states and regulate them in real time, especially while in connection with others, is something we’ve developed slowly and collectively over years in my community. And I forget, sometimes, that it’s rare.

In our community, we try to hold the line. Parents limit screens, aim to preserve space for analog play. But adults are tethered, too. And we have no one to police our screen-addled time. We scroll. We check out. We flicker. As Davis puts it, we’re caught in the shimmer.

And yet, we resist. We cook meals together. We clean up together. We host evenings with no agenda other than being in a room with one another and seeing what comes up. Some people share. Some don’t. We laugh. We cry. Sometimes we leave lighter. Sometimes we leave raw. And when it’s the latter, I’ve learned to find someone I trust, and talk it through. Often, it’s shame or misattunement, something fragile in me that got brushed the wrong way. But that too is part of the practice.

This practice—of showing up, of staying present, of recovering from awkwardness or alienation—is what prepares us to hold grief, to hold crisis, to hold joy.





Recently, I had dinner with a friend who is a cofounder of a circular economy startup working in renewable energy. He was reflecting on his company's new hires and noticed that the strongest candidates often had one thing in common: they'd played team sports. In soccer, in baseball, they'd learned how to miss a goal, drop a ball, get knocked down, and still stay in the game. That muscle memory—of resilience, belonging, and mutual effort—isn't just useful in sales. It's essential to being human.

## V. Animism, AI, and the Fight for Real

Davis makes a provocative observation: as we rediscover the animacy of plants, rocks, rivers, and forests, we're also creating a new class of beings—AI agents, chatbots, drones—that mimic personhood. He calls it a “*tsunami of algorithmic Others*.”

And yet, he's not in a panic. Animism, he reminds us, isn't just a belief system, it's a way of perceiving—a cultivated sensitivity to life, to presence, to relation. And that capacity can be trained. In fact, it may be the most human impulse we have.

In *WALL-E*, it's the robot who feels the most human. He's messy, glitchy, full of longing. That's what makes him lovable, and so relatable. “The cracks are where the light gets in,” Leonard Cohen wrote. In a too-perfect world, we risk amusing ourselves to death. We need to get knocked off our chair every once in a while.

So, what if the most radical act right now isn't to reject technology, but to use it with intention? To notice what we're reaching for when we reach for our phones? To ask what might happen if we reached for each other instead? If we sat down with a friend to read aloud, to laugh, to share a story? Not because we're broken, but because we're human—messy, glitchy, full of longing, and wired for connection.

## VI. Toward an Enchanted Present

One night, on a wilderness retreat, Davis drank a tea brewed from yerba santa, mugwort, redwood tips, and golden fleece—plants he had “met” along the trail that day. He called it *drinking the day's encounters*.

What would it mean to live that way with people—those within our communities, intentional or otherwise? To sip the day's encounters before they slip into forgetfulness? To taste what we've shared, what we've lost, what we're still building together?

It's not easy to embody the energy of *the wild awake* in a world that constantly lures us into the shimmer. To live that way—digitally literate but not digitally consumed—we'll need rituals. We'll need limits. We'll need to teach our children (and re-teach ourselves) to see the world not just through a screen, but through a lens of reverence.

Because in the end, what survives the algorithm is what has always survived the fire:

community, story, ritual, and love...  
 the face of a child, aglow not with pixels, but with presence...  
 the spark between mother and son reading a story together...  
 the laughter shared over a video game, not because of the screen, but because of the connection it makes possible.

The question is not whether we use technology—  
 but whether it brings us closer,  
 or pulls us further apart. 🌱

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*Kristina Jansen lives in California with her friends and family, in the community she calls Orinda in her writings. She has a master's degree in psychological anthropology, but now works in the renewable energy field. She enjoys writing, gardening, cooking, yoga, identifying climate solutions, and spending time with friends.*

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# AI and Civilization's Collapse

By Kara Huntermoon

“Help! There’s no water in the Big House! What do we do?” I sat in my parents’ living room in Alaska as I read the frantic WhatsApp message sent by my community-mates 1600 miles away in Oregon. *They’ll figure it out without me*, I thought. But the next message made me wonder if they would:

“There’s a grass fire on Bodenhamer Road and we’re on a Level 2 evacuation notice! What do we do?”

Other residents responded on the WhatsApp chat with problem-solving ideas, so I resisted the urge to fix everything. I was on vacation!

I texted back, “You can do this,” and turned my phone off.

While I truly believed they could do it, not everyone shared my conviction. One family moved out eight months later, giving us feedback that the land owners’ absence (and thus inability to respond to emergencies) during the summer contributed to their decision to leave the community.

I felt puzzled by this feedback. The well was repaired within two days through the dedicated work of other community mates, and everyone had access to water via a different well during that time. Firefighters successfully quenched the blaze and the evacuation notice was lifted. Is it really true that my family can’t leave the farm for two weeks to visit grandparents? Or our co-owner can’t go camping for four days?

My father was raised in Alaska, flying bush planes and hunting moose. He was shocked to find that in the “Lower 48,” people thought “the authorities” would take care of emergencies. The Alaska ethic is typified by a memory from my childhood: My parents and siblings and I pick wild blueberries, while my grandfather stands uphill from us with a loaded gun, watching for bears.

My father taught me to face reality, even when it’s hard. He told me it was important to respond to problems, and to “skill up,” to be able to handle even more that may come my way. He never taught me that someone else was going to do it for me. My father’s lessons serve me well now, as my intentional community weathers civilization’s collapse.

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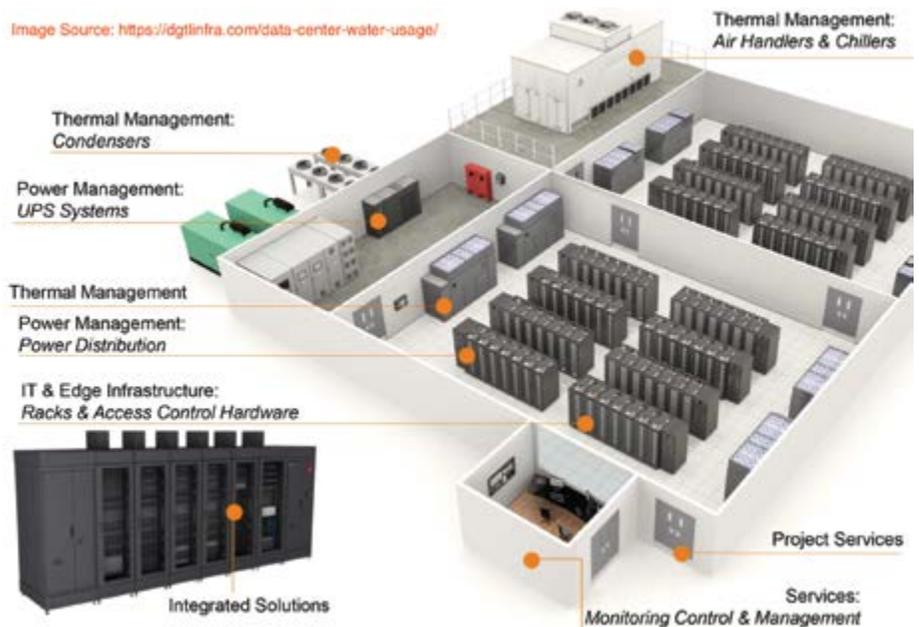
When Rachel Donald interviewed me for her Planet: Critical podcast, I was startled to hear her say that she wants to preserve the “good things” about civilization, like “vaccines and the internet,” while discarding the “bad” through the process of collapse.

It doesn’t work like that. You can’t arbitrarily decide that some resource-heavy systems of civilization will remain, while other systems break down through the lack of available resources to maintain them.

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It’s not like in the movies. We won’t have a zombie apocalypse. Instead, our days will become increasingly stressful.

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As John Michael Greer so elegantly describes in his theory of catabolic collapse, a “collapse of civilization” indicates that infrastructure is degraded or destroyed, and there aren’t enough resources available to repair or replace them. People then abandon that infrastructure to return to a handcraft economy, meeting their needs through direct relationships with the living Earth.

“Infrastructure” can be social, like the government institutions currently being dismantled by the Trump administration. It can be physical, like Eugene City Hall, demolished in 2015 and never rebuilt, as the price of construction rapidly climbed higher than the city coffers. It can be economic, as incomes decrease in value and groceries increase in price.

“Destruction and degradation” can be sudden, as when the Holiday Farm Fire razed 768 structures, two-thirds of the town of Blue River, Oregon, in September of 2020. It can also be gradual, like the streets getting more pitted and cracked, with no money for road crews to resurface them. We learn where the potholes are so we can swerve around them and avoid damaging the car that we can’t afford to replace.

It’s not like in the movies. We won’t have a zombie apocalypse. Instead, we will go about our increasingly stressful days as political chaos impacts one family and then another. Some of our friends leave the country to seek “safety” as expatriates. Others move to a rural area to get away from increasing crime and visibly distressed urban street people. Still others band together with their neighbors to create “Neighborhood Watch” programs and “Resilience Hubs.” One thing is sure: “the authorities” seem increasingly unlikely to take care of us.

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Eventually, resources to maintain the internet will degrade as well. The US power grid is already stressed by aging infrastructure built primarily in the 1960s. Nearly three out of every four transmission lines is approaching the end of its expected lifespan of 50-80 years. The addition of AI hastens its destruction.

A typical large AI data center uses millions of gallons of water per day (in some cases, over a billion gallons of water per year) and 100-200 MW of electricity as a continuous load (876,000-1,752,000 megawatt-hours annually), enough to serve at least 75,000-150,000 households with their needs. In several states, officials have reversed long-planned closures of coal power plants as new AI data centers are using all the wind and solar energy intended as a replacement for coal. AI can advertise itself as using “100 percent sustainable” energy, while the town is forced to continue to burn coal and natural gas to power people’s homes.

People often don’t realize what “the internet” is, in terms of physical infrastructure. Large data centers are warehouses containing banks of computing infrastructure, powered by electricity and cooled by water. Wires made of metal, glass, and plastic con-

nect between some computers and others; satellites orbiting Earth do some of the connecting. Mining is required for many of the materials in this infrastructure, including rare earth metals. The entire system requires fossil fuels for its manufacture. There’s no question that the process of creating the internet’s infrastructure is inherently unsustainable.

The majority of internet connections are carried by undersea cables, even when your specific device is wireless. As Adam Satariano writes for the *New York Times*, “A 456-foot ship named Durable will eventually deliver the cable to sea. But first, the cable is assembled inside a sprawling factory...filled with specialized machinery used to maintain tension on the wire and encase it in protective skin....A year of planning goes into charting a cable route that avoids underwater hazards, but the cables still have to withstand heavy currents, rock slides, earthquakes, and interference from fishing trawlers. Each cable is expected to last up to 25 years....Subsea projects cost up to \$350 million, depending on the length of the cable.”

Here’s what will happen: Something will damage the cables, cutting off communication between continents. People will talk about repairing them, but the resources needed to do so will no longer be available. As there are many undersea cables, the internet will slowly degrade in speed and quality, like our roads, and we will work around the “potholes” until we can no longer send emails. The last computer networks will be local in scope, staying connected within an office building or town until it becomes impossible to source parts to repair old equipment.

The internet is unsustainable. “Unsustainable” means, by definition, that it cannot continue indefinitely. It will end as finite resources are exhausted. The widespread adoption of AI will speed up collapse by accelerating the depletion of resources.

At the same time, social infrastructure that we rely on will be degraded and destroyed by AI. It is already impossible to tell, in many cases, whether a video, image, or article was created by a human being in an attempt to reflect reality,



or whether it was crafted by AI. Unless you switch to a search engine like Duck Duck Go that allows you to turn off AI search features, or type “-AI” after every Google search prompt, most people are now reading an AI summary instead of actually clicking on a webpage to find the answers to their questions.

Not only are we struggling to assess whether source material is legitimate or not, we now find it impossible to even track the source material for the information we consume. AI search results can be completely unhinged from reality, and we might not even notice. We are already swamped by “disinformation” in every level of society. That impacts the real world in various ways, including influencing who gets elected to powerful government offices.

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As infrastructure degrades and we no longer have the resources to repair or replace the physical components of the internet, our computers will stop communicating with each other. Will that be such a terrible thing? Sure, we enjoy rapid data searches for answers to our questions, but those search results are increasingly suspect. Yes, we can have video calls with people who live in different time zones, but those people are not going to feed our pets when we go on vacation or drive us to the hospital when we break a bone. We will lose some things when we lose the internet, but we will also gain the opportunity to build closer, more real connections with people we can actually hug.

I’m as addicted to the internet as anybody. I live in awe of the human ingenuity required to create that technology. But I don’t believe it’s all good, and I don’t think it will be saved as resources deplete and infrastructure degrades. I’m preparing myself for a life that is “all real, all the time”: skilling up, as my dad taught me, by having face-to-face relationships and building connections with my neighbors.

We will have a future without internet, and AI will hasten the technology’s demise. Good thing our ancestors lived without it for the vast majority of human history. There is actual proof that we can do this, including in the living memory



*Kara's students show off their Zarzo willow trays: a sustainable technology.*

Photos courtesy of Kara Huntermoon

of everyone over the age of 45 today. As with any crisis or cultural change, we will figure it out together. 🌱

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*Kara Huntermoon spends most of her time in direct relationship with the real world. However, she finally gave in and opened a Substack account. Now people have an easy way to financially support her work as she builds community resources to respond to the polycrisis: [karahuntermoon.substack.com](http://karahuntermoon.substack.com).*

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# The Algorithm Blues: Going Nuclear

By Albert Bates

*Adapted and expanded from a post of August 26, 2025, “Nuking the Windmills,” at the author’s Substack, “The Great Change”: [cooldesign.substack.com/p/nuking-the-windmills](https://cooldesign.substack.com/p/nuking-the-windmills).*

## Part One: A Genie Appears

*The masses have never thirsted after truth. They turn aside from evidence that is not to their taste, preferring to deify error, if error seduce them. Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master; whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim.*

—Gustav Le Bon<sup>1</sup>

Whether addiction to chatbots will make it into the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) is still an open question. Nora Bateson reminds us that attaching to other humans is an essential condition of being a mammalian life form. If, for whatever reason, we find human interactions difficult—and it seems that more and more of us are experiencing that—“getting lost in an AI chatbot companionship/guru/teacher” may fulfill our shared need for social belonging. Bateson writes:

I know some would say it could be early childhood attachment & connection that is the fiber that will protect someone from becoming lost in a situation. I have also known many people who did not have that sort of attachment upbringing who managed to attain an ability to pass through situa-

tions that would capture others. Certainly, the fragmentation of being alive in a world of reductionism has forced strange sense-making for survival. To synthesize the needs of being an interdependent organism in a social system of isolated independence is contorting vitality & necessary interrelationship: people need to need each other. Needs get twisted up.<sup>2</sup>

Others are skeptical that AI personal tools will be as big a fad as they are forecast to be. Futurist, economist, and now a university professor, Amory Lovins writes:

Some of my Stanford students who tried various modern AI offerings then chose to avoid them as superficially enticing, sometimes useful, but ultimately feeling like addictive substitutes for critical thought—dulling skills, weakening imagination, and obscuring personal creativity. These students want a tool to enable their efforts, not a usurper to supplant them and add unknowable amounts of error. I know the plural of ‘anecdote’ is not ‘evidence,’ but consistently seeing such mixed reactions in this capable young audience makes me more skeptical about a vast untapped consumer market for the AI tools now offered.<sup>3</sup>

Lovins’ lecture was part of Stanford’s Extreme Energy Efficiency course and is hosted on their Integrative Design Learning Hub platform. Lovins was primarily focused on his central theme, misallocation of capital, but towards the end of the lecture, he ventured into subjects closer to the heart of many communitarians and social innovators. When we get past the awe of communicating, in conversational speech, with a machine-learned device, we can be easily lured into imagining there is actual intelligence on the other side. He says there is an even graver risk:

...[T]hat recursive training on and regurgitation of errors will corrupt the quality of AI models and of the entire scientific/technological enterprise. How? By diluting sound literature—vetted over lifetimes by thousands of human experts worldwide, meticulously applying experience and empirical data—with a tsunami of lower-quality machine inferences, summaries, and repetitions. Filtering and altering more information does not make it more trustworthy and traceable, but on the contrary adds bias and error (plus potentially propaganda and conspiracy theories).<sup>4</sup>

This is a phenomenon I have been commenting on for a num-



Chris Roth

ber of years. Millennials, also known as Generation Y, are the demographic cohort born approximately between 1981 and 1996. Millennials grew up during the advent of the internet and digital technology, and many experienced the rise of social media during their formative years. Facebook was launched in a Harvard dorm in February 2004. Teens and 20-something Millennials were early adopters.

Facebook and other social media platforms created algorithms optimized primarily for engagement, but at what cost? The engagement algorithms, which brought great riches to the originators and their investors, prioritized posts that generated the most comments, shares, likes, and ad revenues, paying little heed to the correlation with limbic brain centers and reward chemistry. Posts that tended to be divisive, sensational, or outrage-inducing stimulated more visceral, “fight-or-flight” responses. Posts that boosted tribal affiliation, even at the expense of broader social harmony, were rewarded with greater engagement. The upturned blue thumb became a new drug, microdosing dopamine to keep us hooked. Predictably, this engagement-driven approach has led to amplification of misinformation, hate speech, polarization, and violence.

Whistleblower reports revealed that Meta was aware that these algorithms caused mental harm, especially among teenagers and young adults, but prioritized enterprise growth over user well-being. Features like infinite scroll were added to exacerbate addiction by keeping users engaged for longer, triggering hormonal responses similar to addictive substances.<sup>5</sup> Bateson warns, “It is possible for human beings to warp their realities and get caught up in just about anything at the expense of everything.”<sup>6</sup>

The internet fulfilled Marshall McLuhan’s prophecy that we would become a global village. He imagined that television would be the vehicle, but that is forgivable. *Understanding Media* was published in 1964, coincidentally the same year Douglas Engelbart invented the mouse at SRI (Stanford Research Institute). The personal computer—and smartphones—are to television as television was to newsreels. With each step, we become more knowledgeable and more isolated.

McLuhan warned that a global village would carry the disadvantages of both globalization and a village. The disadvantage of the former is uniformity. The risk of the latter is gossip. In the post-modern world, McLuhan warned, disinformation, superstition, and scandalous claims may trump science and reason—a return to the pre-modern. Giving computers the global reach of new media and now AI makes the situation worse than in a village. It makes it easier for sequestered extremists to find each other and to convert masses of the unwary to a uniting cause.

On September 9, 2025, Elon Musk explained on a podcast that his own AI chatbot, Grok, is being trained differently than those of his competitors.

Yeah. So we’re we’re running a lot of...using a lot of...of inference compute and reasoning to look at all of the source data, which is really the corpus of human knowledge. And then, uh, thinking about each piece of information and then adding, mod...adding what’s missing, and correcting mistakes and removing falsehoods from that training data. So it’s like if you take, say, Wikipedia as an example, but this really applies to books, PDFs, websites, and every form of information. Grok



Chris Roth

is using heavy amounts of inference compute to say, look at, for example, a Wikipedia page and say what is true, partially true, false or missing in this page. Now rewrite the page to correct. Remove the falsehoods. Correct the half-truths and add the missing context.<sup>7</sup>

While some may think this helpful—who can argue with deleting false information from an encyclopedia?—anyone who knows the process rigor by which Wikipedia reaches truth will be alarmed. Musk proposes to recast AI learning in the same right-wing extremist mold that you can encounter on X, formerly Twitter, especially from Musk’s posts.

COVID-19 isolation exacerbated the constricted worldview already established by social media platforms. “Rage-baiting,” increased cyberbullying, and negative content soared. Vaccine disinformation had a particularly deadly effect, with arguably millions of fatalities. Millennials in particular, who had come to rely on Facebook for news and social connection, experienced negative mental health impacts, including increased depression, anxiety, alienation, and feelings of inadequacy, but the effects on younger children, kept out of school for a year or more and forced to remain confined at home—and to their screens—have yet to be fully assessed.

In my own experience, I was outside the country when the pandemic began closing borders and I decided to remain where I was. I remained in a remote nature reserve for more than two years, and when I returned to my ecovillage in Tennessee, I was surprised by the changes. There was heightened political polarization and a marked decline in trust. Disinformation flowed as freely as empirical truth. Science, or even healthy skepticism, had flown the roost, supplanted by viral rumors and superstition. Elders who implored their younger counterparts to take a breath and let reason be heard were shouted down in village meetings that had previously been civil and friendly.

“Indeed, it is becoming ever more obvious,” the psychologist Carl Jung wrote, “that it is not famine, not earthquakes, not microbes, not cancer but man himself who is man’s greatest danger to man, for the simple reason that there is no adequate protection against psychic epidemics, which are infinitely more devastating than the worst of natural catastrophes.”<sup>8</sup> Jung observed that crimes the individual alone could never stand are freely committed by the



group. Sowing fear places a group into a state of panic and primes them for delusional beliefs and mass psychosis.

Psychologist Joost Meerloo believes the effects are cumulative. If so, we are only just at the beginning of the experience. Meerloo writes: “Each wave of terrorizing...creates its effects more easily—after a breathing spell—than the one that preceded it because people are still disturbed by their previous experience. Morality becomes lower and lower, and the psychological effects of each new propaganda campaign become stronger; it reaches a public already softened up.”<sup>9</sup>

Meerloo’s assessment of social contagions mirrors Lovins’ take on AI:

Scraping and remixing the Web doesn’t improve its highly variable quality, but only defeats and crowds out precision, accuracy, discrimination, expert judgment, attribution, confirmation, and credibility that science took centuries to achieve. Such data pollution is hard or impossible to reverse.<sup>10</sup>

Never before in history have such effective means existed to manipulate a society into the psychosis of totalitarianism. Smartphones and social media, television and the internet, all in conjunction with bots that spread propaganda and algorithms that quickly censor the flow of unwanted information, allow influencers to easily assault the minds of the unwary. The addictive nature of these technologies means that many people voluntarily subject themselves to a non-stop bombardment. “Modern technology,” explains Meerloo, “teaches man to take for granted the world he is looking at; he takes no time to retreat and reflect. Technology lures him on, dropping him into its wheels and movements. No rest, no meditation, no reflection, no conversation—the senses are continually overloaded with stimuli. [Man] doesn’t learn to question his world anymore; the screen offers him answers—ready-made.”<sup>11</sup>

My own story is pretty depressing at the moment. One of the things that comes with a modicum of celebrity is stalkers. I attracted a Facebook stalker who started poisoning the circle of my friends, claiming I was a pedophile, a fugitive hiding out in Mexico, and that my late mother had bought off any police who came looking for me. The allegations multiplied and became more absurd—and easily disproven—with each retelling, but it did not seem to slow the pace, or diminish engagement. My stalker got me removed from Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, and the rest,

so that I could not respond. I was off for more than three years. Perhaps that was a good thing, or I might not have gained the perspective to write this essay.

The sad fact is that our intentional communities culture—and that includes the hippie ecovillage ecosystem—is ill-adapted to resist social algorithms engineered for engagement. With shorts/reels/TikToks and the media my stalker used, AI no longer asks you to search for the content you’d like, you only decide which videos to *stop* watching. Many of my friends of 50+ years couldn’t or didn’t stop watching negative content being posted about me until I came back from my travels to discover my village had turned on me and cast me out, forgoing the rights of members and the usual investigative mechanisms contained in the processes outlined in our bylaws.

We seem to be in a race to the bottom of the brain stem. I lay the blame for that at the feet of the engagement algorithms and the greed of the Tech Bros. I fear that AI will only speed the dissolution of reason, and will do so along generational lines. According to Jung, for those of us who wish to help return sanity to an insane world, the first step is to bring order to our own minds, and to live in a way that provides inspiration for others to follow.

As Thomas Paine observed: “Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.”<sup>12</sup>

## Part Two: One Way Out

On Wednesday, September 10, 2025, Larry Ellison became the richest man on Earth. On that day, his net worth grew by \$101 billion, the largest single-day gain recorded in Bloomberg’s Billionaires Index. The source of his wealth? Data centers.

In 1995–96, internet usage was growing so fast—sometimes doubling in just 100 days—it was transformed into a media meme, triggering a stampede to overbuild optical fiber networks, with 10-fold growth just in 1996–2000, much of it debt-financed. But by 2002, 97 percent of that fiber had gone dark. Perhaps you don’t recall the names—Global Crossing, WorldCom/MCI, Enron—because by 2002, they had all filed for bankruptcy. Others—Level 3, Quest, Lucent, Ciena, Corning, and JDS—were acquired, absorbed, or liquidated for pennies by late entrants like Verizon and AT&T, which chose to adopt satellite technology.

Analysts like Amory Lovins warn that overbuilt infrastructure could lead to ghost server farms, similar to the fiber catastrophe or early semiconductor busts. The three main US credit-rating agencies warned in 2024 that despite potentially “strong benefit potential” to utilities building new supplies to power data centers, “the potential for inaccurate load increase forecasts” could create “substantial credit risk.” Smaller players will be washed out.

As real-world limits set in, our budding ChatGPT springtime romance may descend into a long AI winter that has us searching for just enough watts to charge our phones and watches.

AI tools like ChatGPT are powered by vast data centers—warehouses filled with power-hungry computer chips—which already consume 4.5 percent of the electricity used in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Over the next three or four years, that number is expected to dou-

ble or even triple, to as much as 12 percent of electric demand by 2028. At present, about a quarter of data centers' throughput is for AI but that could jump to 75 percent in the coming years.<sup>14</sup> McKinsey projects a 441 percent global increase in world data-center loads envisaged by 2030.<sup>15</sup> The International Energy Agency (IEA) projects that by that year, four years from now, AI will use 62 percent of all global electric supply.<sup>16</sup>

Industry analysts have long foreseen power as the Achilles heel of AI, cloud computing, decarbonization, and indeed, automation in general. Some effort has been made to site new data centers close to existing power supplies like wind farms and hydro dams, but the exponential growth in demand, to say nothing of projected demand, is already outstripping supplies.

Opposition to data centers is blocking billions of dollars for projects across the US and Europe—\$64 billion in US data center projects alone.<sup>17</sup> Where the rabble once rallied against factories, warehouses, or retail sprawl, they're now opposing data centers. Notwithstanding the ability of AI to spawn political polarity, "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) sentiment has been growing across all demographics. Local uprisings against server farms are bipartisan.

Republican officials raise concerns about tax incentives—36 states provide subsidies—and energy grid strain—AI takes a fourth of Virginia's electricity, with 40 GW (40 billion Watts) of server farms proposed to meet projected growth. Colorado offers data centers a 3¢/kWh "economic development" discount—a taxpayer-borne subsidy—for 10 years. Where is DOGE when you need it?

Democrats tend to focus on massive resource consumption—especially cooling water—but also environment,<sup>18</sup> health, the vastly greater number of jobs provided by renewables, and quality-of-life.

In Ireland, the government has halted new server farm developments near Dublin after the IEA informed them centers could gobble up 32 percent of Ireland's power by 2026. Moratoria on new data centers in Singapore and Amsterdam began in 2019.<sup>19</sup> The Broligarchs are decrying the Luddites for their "symbol politics," while triggering FOMO reactions in more favorable countries like the Emirates.

ExxonMobil has announced plans to construct a 1.5-gigawatt methane gas-fired power plant exclusively to supply energy to data centers.<sup>20</sup> The advantage is that gas power plants can be constructed relatively quickly (12-24 months) compared to small module nuclear reactors (SMRs) that can take a decade or more. As cited by Data Center Dynamics, analysts from S&P Global project that data centers could require up to three billion cubic feet per day (bcf/d) of methane gas by 2030.<sup>21</sup> Methane is a climate crisis accelerant—80 times more potent for global warming in the short term than carbon dioxide (approximately 25 times greater than CO<sub>2</sub> over a 100-year period, after which it decays to long-lived greenhouse gases).

Amazon is building a facility in Indiana that will need the equivalent energy of a million homes.<sup>22</sup> Meta is planning a data center the size of Manhattan.<sup>23</sup> Alphabet and Microsoft each said they'd invest \$75 billion to \$80 billion in 2025.<sup>24</sup> Meta said its capital expenditures for 2025 were estimated to run between \$66 billion and \$72 billion.<sup>25</sup>

Another black swan on the pond is crypto. Led by venture capitalist billionaire David Sachs from his aerie in the Eisen-

hower Executive Office Building next to the White House, the US Treasury is quietly drifting off the fiat dollar standard and onto a token stablecoin, perhaps bearing the image of our golden Sun King. Keep in mind that cryptocurrency mining used up to 2.3 percent of US electricity in 2024. For comparison, indoor cannabis cultivation used about one percent, and is completely displaceable to outdoor farms.<sup>26</sup>

## Nuclear Renaissance

Since the word from Washington is that wind machines spoil the view from golf courses and should be banned, Big Tech is turning to nuclear power, the darling of tax-and-spenders.<sup>27</sup> The Trump Department of Energy has provided 16 sites on federal land to bypass the Nuclear Regulatory Commission licensing process and safety reviews. Public finance regulations ("red tape" in MAGA jargon) are also being shredded to secretly transfer data centers' trillion-dollar costs to existing customers, a vast wealth transfer from ratepayers to utility shareholders and Big Tech companies.<sup>28</sup>

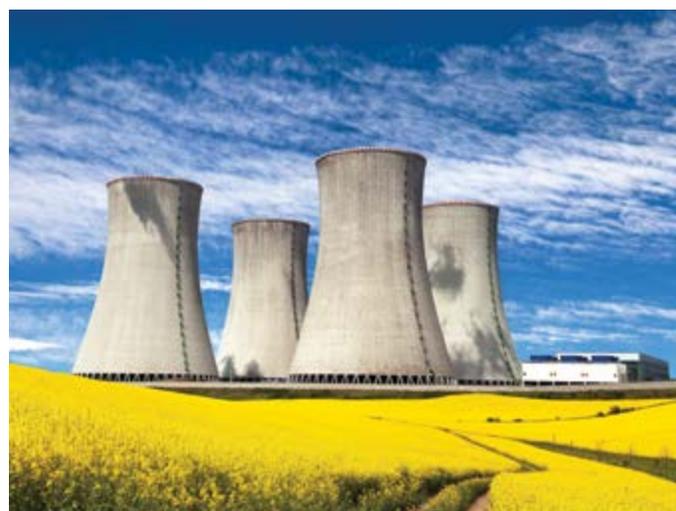
Renewables and storage are already 93 percent of US and 95 percent of world electric capacity expected to be added this year, and for good reason. Amory Lovins says, "The global nuclear enterprise adds in a good year only as much net capacity (additions minus retirements) as renewables add every two days. Renewables' high speed and low cost have run off with the world power market.... Anyone preferring a fossil or nuclear plant must be influenced by criteria other than cost, speed, and reliability."

Bill McKibben is fond of telling audiences these days that "It's really important to understand that as of about four years ago, we live on a planet where the cheapest way to produce energy is to point a sheet of glass at the sun."<sup>30</sup>

In the UK, funding of £2.5 billion has been set aside to support the construction of publicly funded small modular reactors. Rolls-Royce's selection in June 2025 as the preferred bidder for a prototype 470MW design forced the car company to peek under the hood and realize there was something being overlooked. It's not a small thing, either.

Fuel.

Imagine driving your Rolls to the gas pump and the sign says \$278 per gallon. Your Rolls gets five miles per gallon. Most nuclear plants in the US and elsewhere would have shut down long ago



were it not for the fact that consumers, including utilities, don't pay for enrichment of the nuclear fuel. Taxpayers do. Utilities don't pay for insurance, either, but that is another story.

Spot uranium prices have more than tripled over the past four years, reaching as high as \$107 per pound in early 2024. Forecasts indicate that uranium prices could rise from current levels to as high as \$135 per pound in 2026—\$297,000 per ton of uranium ore.

Global uranium mining peaked in the year 1980, reaching an all-time high production of 69,692 long tons. Production has not returned to those peak levels since then. Indeed, had not the former Soviet Union begun dismantling warheads and recycling the plutonium for the START and SALT treaties (later exited by Trump), arguably, many nuclear plants would have shut down soon after the turn of the Millennium.

Currently, global uranium production is around 140 million pounds annually (6364 tons), but under the present plan, demand will at least triple or quadruple by 2050. Utilities will need to find about 2.1 billion pounds (nearly a million tons) of uranium through 2040. The ripe fruit has already been gathered and exploration would be unprofitable without massive subsidies. New mines have long development timelines (5-10+ years) and need significant capital investment to come online. Enrichment and conversion facilities must also expand.

It takes about 10 tons of refined uranium to produce one ton of nuclear fuel. As uranium mining exhausts the easy pickings, finding that 10 tons may mean removing 1000 or more tons of

overburden, and that amount is steadily rising. Australia has the largest mining reserves—28 percent of supply. Other exporters include Kazakhstan (14 percent), Canada (10 percent), Namibia (8 percent), Russia (8 percent), South Africa (5 percent), Niger (6 percent), China (5 percent), and Brazil (3 percent). While not as radioactive as pure uranium, much of the overburden and all of the mill tailings are radioactive and pose a significant health hazard as they migrate into rivers, wind-blown dust, wildlife, or even construction materials like cinderblock.<sup>31</sup>

A standard nuclear reactor requires a million gallons per minute of fresh, filtered water. Mining thousands of tons of ore can take far more.<sup>32</sup>

If you ask a Tech Bro, he would tell you not to worry—that with robots and AI-assisted engineering, the production costs of fuel will drop dramatically. I can't help picturing a dog chasing its tail.

I asked ChatCPT what she thought about it. She said, "If global nuclear power demand keeps rising and supply remains tight, future nuclear power prices may be higher and more volatile than in the past. Would you like me to help you write a business plan?" 🐦

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*Founder of the Ecovillage Training Center at The Farm in Tennessee and former President of the Global Ecovillage Network, Albert Bates is a permaculturist, inventor, and author of more than 20 books, including Biochar Solution, Burn, Plagued, Making Waves, Taming Plastic, and The Paris Agreement. CO<sub>2</sub> levels at his birth were 310.4 ppm.*

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# AI: A Conversation

*By kaseja wilder and Mariner Wilder*

In a conversation with a community member, I (kaseja) was going off about my troubled feelings about AI. He suggested I create an article for COMMUNITIES. I wrote down some of my thoughts and sent them to one of my kids, Mariner, who has an interest in studying AI. This is what I sent Mariner:

I feel deeply suspicious of AI. It concerns me that AI has no moral compass, no soul.

Increasingly, people are turning to AI to solve problems of all different kinds. Recently, I was in a group of community mates who were gathered to increase our ability to resolve conflicts in the context of living and working together to make the world a better place. One of the people at the meeting suggested that we record the meeting and use AI for notetaking. I pointed out that AI is extremely expensive when it comes to using environmental resources and was met with very mild acknowledgment.

I was horrified. I understand that not everyone has the same level of concern about ecological collapse that I do, but in this context of folks gathered to put effort into making the world a better place through community, I did not expect to be met with such a high degree of apathy regarding excess use of resources for notetaking. This seems to be a fatal sidestepping of reality. AI is a perfect setup for people continuing to feel tragically disconnected from material reality, from our bodies, from Mother Earth.

As a social worker, I am continually being invited to turn my progress notes over to AI and am offered workshops on how to make sure using AI remains HIPAA compliant. Privacy aside, turning my due diligence over to a system that mines its synthesis of information from a capitalistic (and one might also ar-

gue white, androcentric, and so on) point of view feels foolish, short-sighted, lazy, and not well thought out.

The ecological impact alone should give us pause!

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Mariner did not disappoint me and responded with an email:

Hi kaseja,

I appreciate you reaching out about this and would love to share what I know.

I'm definitely not an expert on this but I have done a lot of research on the topic and I think it's important to recognize potential benefits alongside the very real costs—we should find less destructive ways to use this tool for good, rather than try to eliminate it (something I don't think is possible).

I know the most about language-focused AI models (large language models or LLMs) so that will be the main focus of my analysis here.

There are a few fundamental problems with AI. First, the name is a marketing tool; an AI model doesn't think like a human does—it uses a system to “learn” by processing massive amounts of data (I will come back to this), a process that has been used for a long time and is not inherently a problem (at smaller scales). It then has an algorithm inside it that is both unknown and not directly interfaceable by a programmer. Rather, the way this algorithm is developed is by weighting certain “values,” and “rewarding” it for doing something that aligns with that and “punishing” it for doing things that are different.



The systems for weighting used by modern LLMs are extremely complex, using a system dubbed “attention” where weights are dynamically adjusted during processing. This is beyond what I thoroughly understand, so I can’t go into too much depth about it. But essentially this process “trains” it to do what its developers want, such as answer questions or interact with queries in a conversational manner (for chatbots) or generate content from a prompt based on the totality of content that has been processed. They are deeply tied to the internet, as that contains effectively all of the data they use (although some AI companies have also trained their models on pirated media, especially books—this is still accessed via the internet but it isn’t content original to the internet). Wikipedia is also a major source of AI training data.

To come back to the massive amount of data part, one important thing AI models do very wrong is ignoring websites’ robots.txt, a file websites include to tell nonintelligent visitors how they are allowed to engage with the site. AI companies and models send out crawlers that scour the web for content, similarly to how search engines work, except search engines respect the “rules of the robot web” while AI does not. Instead, their crawlers include methods for circumventing any human confirmation systems, like captchas (which, by the way, are also used to train AI), so they can view and process all of the information the site contains. This practice is known as “scraping” and puts extra strain on every website, something that disproportionately affects small businesses and projects that don’t have the infrastructural backend to support the massively increased traffic when that traffic consists of parasitic programs that provide nothing in terms of business or human interaction.

A large language model is essentially a facsimile of a human’s ability to process and produce (but not to truly understand) language. LLMs have beneficial uses, such as speech-to-text, text-to-speech, or machine translation; machine translation can have good and bad applications, depending on how it is used. I would not call it unambiguously good, but I think it can benefit people in major ways and would consider it an overall positive thing. However, LLMs are often used to displace human workers and generate massive amounts of content, colloquially referred to as “slop,” to post to the internet in the hopes of generating engagement and ad revenue. This practice also leads to the widespread dissemination of misinformation, and also the training of AI on the output of AI. Sometimes it can be immediately obvious that an article or piece of content was not

written by a human, but it is increasingly difficult to distinguish as models become more and more effective.

Finally, the training and use of AI models requires a massive amount of electricity that must be produced, typically through the burning of fossil fuels such as natural gas. There has been some investment into nuclear and geothermal power to provide this energy, but it is not nearly enough to keep up with increasing data center electricity use and thus the widespread use of AI has resulted in increasingly severe environmental impacts. In addition to the demand for electricity, the hardware these data centers consist of has an environmental impact in the manufacturing process and requires massive amounts of water for cooling, straining municipal water supplies and damaging local ecosystems.

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I’m so grateful for Mariner’s wisdom, insight, and research. Look, I’m a people person. I care about people and help people feel more connected to themselves and each other in almost everything I do. I feel worried about the people who are looking for connection, understanding, love, and relationship and are turning to AI in this increasingly fractured world. I try to avoid the most egregious forms of AI (although I do love talk to text, use the internet, and occasionally do a search where I do not add “-AI”). However, my attention will mostly be in face-to-face.

It seems wise to accept that AI is here to stay and to figure out ways to get it out of the control of folks who just want to exploit people and the planet, and that seem consistent with other ways we are trying to make life more human-focused and sustainable. 🐦

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*kaseja wilder is a lesbian, a therapist, and a communitarian living in Eugene, Oregon. When not facilitating meetings and helping folks be happier and more grounded in general, she enjoys hiking, meditating, and tending to various more-than-human friends (such as olive trees).*

*Mariner Wilder was raised in and out of several intentional communities with a large extended chosen family network. They have had a passion for computers and technology since childhood, and they are always looking for ways to share the knowledge they have gained through that passion with others to help people understand our increasingly digital world.*



# AI, Wi-Fi, and the Commune: How Digital Tools Are Reshaping Communal Life—for Better and Worse

By Keenan Dakota and ChatGPT

Living in community isn't all singing circles and potlucks. It can be emotionally intense—sometimes too intense. Sharing space, meals, decisions, and moods with the same group of people day in and day out can wear down even the most committed communards. That's where digital technology, surprisingly, lends a hand. Sometimes, the healthiest thing you can do for your group is to take a break *from* your group—and tuning out with a podcast or retreating into an online rabbit hole can offer just enough distance to make communal life sustainable over the long haul.

The stereotype of communal life often includes a sense of isolation from the “real world,” as if moving to the land means disappearing off the map. But the rise of the internet has flipped that script. Now, even remote communities can stay plugged in to global conversations, political movements, professional networks, and niche subcultures. One minute you're milking a goat, the next you're editing a YouTube series on sustainable living or organizing an online mutual aid network.

Remote work has also made it far more viable for rural or off-grid communities to stay financially afloat. Members can log in, do their jobs from home, and still have time to help plant potatoes or fix the grey-water system. A once-stark tradeoff—economic survival vs. intentional living—is now less absolute. For some communities, it's finally possible to do both.

The internet has also become a lifeline for connection across distances. Prospective members who never would've stumbled on some obscure, tucked-away ecovillage can now find it with a few keystrokes. Community websites, social media posts, or quirky YouTube interviews act as beacons for like-minded souls searching for something different. At the

same time, longtime members can stay in touch with friends and family outside the bubble. The digital world doesn't just bring in new people—it keeps old ties alive.

Digital media even brings people *together* in new ways. Groups gather to watch obscure documentaries or hyper-niche content that never would've made it into a local video store, let alone mainstream TV. The internet can be a communal campfire—as long as everyone remembers to show up.

Still, not all tech use in community is utopian. Some people retreat a little too far. Headphones go on, eye contact goes down, and before you know it, people are physically present but emotionally checked out. There's a fine line between taking needed space and disengaging entirely—and it's easy to cross.

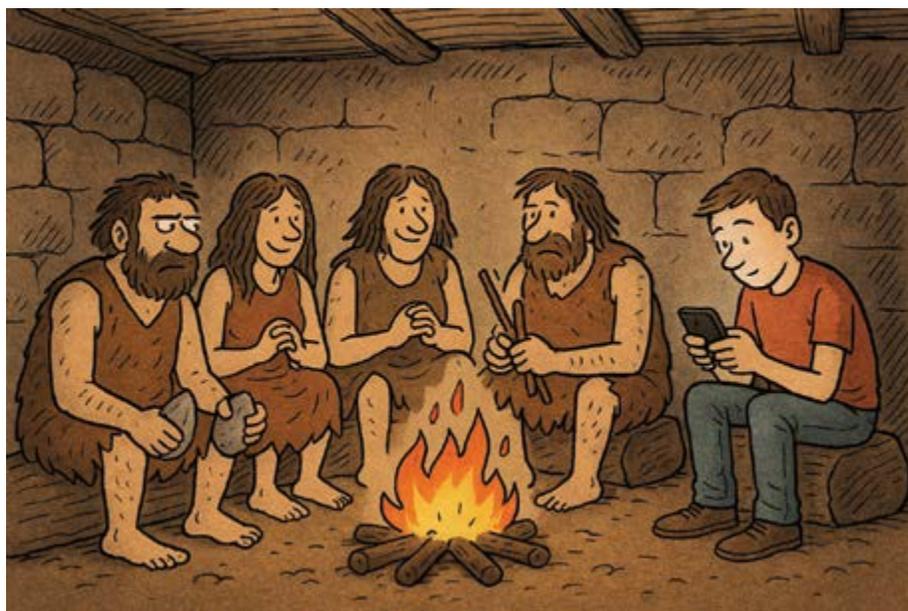
And yet, there's something reassuring about living in a place where no one's panicking about being replaced by AI. Communal living tends to offer an antidote to tech-induced job insecurity. There's always something useful to do—cook, fix, grow, teach, care, build—and none of it requires machine learning. In a well-functioning community, people are valued for their presence and contribution. If AI does a job better, or faster, great!

So yes, communal life is messy. It's emotional. It can be overwhelming. But with the help of a little tech, it's becoming more doable, more connected, and maybe even more resilient than ever. 🌱

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*Keenan Dakota has lived for over four decades at Twin Oaks, one of the longest-running intentional communities in the United States ([twinoaks.org](http://twinoaks.org)). Rooted in values of cooperation, sustainability, and shared labor, Twin Oaks has shaped Keenan's worldview and writing, which often explores themes of community, culture, and the shifting tides of population and technology. Drawing from daily life in a real-world utopian experiment, Keenan offers a grounded, firsthand perspective on what it means to live collectively in the 21st century.*

For more about this piece, see “The Evolution of an Article” on the following pages.



ChatGPT, in response to Keenan's prompt, “can you make a humorous image of the conflict between technology and communal living. Thanks!”

# The Evolution of an Article

*By Keenan Dakota, ChatGPT, and the Editor*

**Editor's Note:** Keenan submitted the preceding article, "AI, Wi-Fi, and the Commune: How Digital Tools Are Reshaping Communal Life—for Better and Worse," with the message, "I asked ChatGPT to write an article based on your prompt. After a few back and forths, here is what it came up with." In answer to further questions, Keenan estimated that the entire cowriting process took about 20 minutes, and that the final content is perhaps 50 percent him, 50 percent ChatGPT.

Interested in learning more about how it evolved, I asked to see the previous drafts, which turned out to reveal additional nuances, giving the distinct impression that ChatGPT itself (or the knowledge base it is drawing from) is considerably more critical and skeptical of AI and other tech than its human coauthor in this case. Please check out this additional material, and if you're inspired, email [editor@gen-us.net](mailto:editor@gen-us.net) to let us know your impressions.

## All-AI Version

**Keenan:**

Can you write an article about intentional community with this as the focus: CommunITy or DystopAla?: Information Technology, Artificial Intelligence, and Intentional Community

**ChatGPT:**

**Community or Dystopia?: Information Technology, Artificial Intelligence, and Intentional Community**

In the 1960s and '70s, intentional communities sprouted like mushrooms after a rainstorm—each one dreaming of a world free from the machinery of industrial society. Fast-forward half a century, and many of those same communities find themselves in a strange and paradoxical dance with a new kind of machinery: information technology and artificial intelligence.

On one hand, the digital world offers tools that can help communities thrive. Solar systems are smarter. Rainwater catchments are now Wi-Fi-enabled. Coordinating crop rotations, volunteer schedules, or even consensus meetings can be streamlined through group messaging apps and cloud-based spreadsheets. When used well, technology can support the original goals of intentional living: reducing ecological footprints, deepening human relationships, and building self-sufficiency.

But the shadow side of these tools is harder to ignore. Surveillance capitalism, addictive algorithms, and AI-generated content pose subtle but growing threats to the very foundations of community. Many intentional communities were founded on values of presence, trust, and connection. How do you build trust with someone who prefers their phone to your face? How do you practice radical honesty in a world curated by filters and avatars?

At one ecovillage in the Pacific Northwest, a recent meeting about whether to allow AI-generated art in the community newsletter turned into a fiery three-hour debate. Some saw AI as a tool, like a hammer or a shovel—neutral until used with intention. Others saw it as the creeping edge of a dystopia where nothing is real, no one is accountable, and creativity is outsourced to a machine that never sleeps. "If we let AI write our poetry," one elder warned, "then we're letting it write our future."

Elsewhere, communities grapple with issues around children and screens, digital detox policies, and whether to use facial recognition systems for security. Some

communities have created "Tech Sabbaths"—screen-free days to return to analog life. Others have formed working groups to evaluate ethical uses of AI and data privacy, borrowing governance models from open-source software communities.

Perhaps the central question is not whether intentional communities should reject or embrace technology, but how to engage with it without becoming colonized by it. It's not just a matter of what gadgets we use, but of what values those gadgets encode. Does the AI that plans your permaculture beds also record your conversations? Does the app that helps you meditate also mine your data for advertising profiles? Do these technologies serve your community—or slowly dismantle it?

Intentional communities may be among the last cultural spaces where these questions are asked with urgency and clarity. Unlike the wider world, they have the ability to stop, reflect, and choose deliberately. They are laboratories of the possible, testing not only new forms of living, but new relationships to the tools that shape our lives.

In the end, the struggle with information technology and AI may not be about tools at all. It may be about whether we still believe in the project of community itself—a place where humans can live together, share work, resolve conflict, and tell stories not just about what is efficient, but about what is meaningful.

So, community or dystopia? The answer may lie not in the technology we adopt, but in how fiercely we defend the human values we built these communities to protect in the first place.

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Let me know if you'd like to tailor this for a specific publication, add quotes from real communities, or extend it into a longer piece.

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# ChatGPT's Second Draft

## Keenan:

Can you amend that article and include points that the internet allows community to be less insular, that people stay longer because they can get emotional space from each other, that people gather together to watch selected shows together.

## ChatGPT:

Certainly! Here's a full article on **intentional community and contemporary technology**, incorporating your key points:

## Community or Dystopia?: Information Technology, Artificial Intelligence, and Intentional Community

By Keenan [Last Name]

In the popular imagination, intentional communities are often depicted as technology-averse islands of back-to-the-land purism—refuges from the digital deluge of modern life. But the reality on the ground is much more nuanced. As communities across the globe wrestle with the rapid integration of AI, social media, and always-on connectivity, many intentional communities have quietly found ways to embrace certain technologies not in spite of their values, but in service to them.

One of the most surprising and least discussed impacts of the internet on intentional community life is how it *de-insularizes* people. In the past, leaving the city for a commune often meant cutting ties with friends, family, and professional identity. Now, high-speed internet and digital platforms allow residents to maintain long-distance relationships, stay connected to political movements, work remotely, and even collaborate with people across continents. Instead of retreating into an isolated bubble, many communities are becoming nodes in a wider network of ideas and solidarity. You no longer have to choose between commu-

nity and the world—you can inhabit both.

The emotional implications are just as profound. Living communally has always come with a paradox: deep connection is often accompanied by the claustrophobia of too much togetherness. Before broadband, there weren't many graceful exits from social intensity. You couldn't just slip away to decompress with an old friend on the phone or zone out with a documentary that speaks to your mood. Today, the ability to take emotional space via a podcast, a video call, or even a solo YouTube binge has quietly become a pressure-release valve. It helps people stay *longer* in community, not escape from it. Solitude has become more accessible, and with it, longevity of commitment.

This emotional space also makes collective experience more intentional. Instead of passive TV culture or everyone glued to their own feeds, many communities now gather to *curate* media experiences: communal movie nights, shared livestreamed events, binge sessions of socially or politically relevant series. People bring snacks, debate the themes, sometimes shout at the screen. It's the return of the village bonfire, now flickering through pixels.

Of course, the double-edged nature of these tools is never far from view. No community that takes values seriously can ignore the challenges: algorithmic addiction, data privacy, surveillance creep, and the social fragmentation that comes with screen-heavy life. Some groups set clear boundaries—screen-free common spaces, digital sabbaths, or co-learning about the impacts of AI. Others lean into experimentation, developing tech co-ops or open-source platforms that reflect communal ethics.

Ultimately, the question isn't whether technology belongs in intentional community—it's *which* technologies serve community, and *how* they're used. Rejecting all of it is as shortsighted as embracing it blindly. What we're seeing now is a shift from fear of technology to a new kind of literacy: communities learning to shape their tools as deliberately as they shape their gardens, their meals, and their meetings.

In that sense, intentional communities may be at the forefront of a much larger question facing all of us: not how to *escape* the digital age, but how to *humanize* it.

• • •

In response, Keenan writes, "I made some edits to the second draft and then sent it back to ChatGPT asking it to make it better. Then I made a few edits to the last draft and sent it to you. It took about 20 minutes, maybe even less."

Finally, we requested an author bio from Keenan, and received one back, with the note, "ChatGPT wrote this author bio for me. I'll take it!" 🙌



# WhatsApp and Email Wars, Happiness, and Community Law

By Dr. Nimi Langer

Community elections were called in Kibbutz Hoshen. Yaacov, Salim, and Tamara found themselves in a village splintered into rival subcommunities, filled with WhatsApp groups and reply-all email fights. Bullies accused others of bullying; zealots accused others of fanaticism. Each group planted its virtual banner on the village's large lawn, casting itself as the defensive party while rallying against the other group's candidate and members.

This is the story of a kibbutz, an intentional cooperative community, and of the legal reckoning that followed digital rupture and virtual bloody battles. Guided by the science of happiness, it is a call to rethink Community Law, in an age shaped by IT and virtual communication.

## The First Days

At the start of the third millennium, Kibbutz Hoshen, like 200 of the 250 that exist in Israel, underwent profound changes. From a small, collectivist community, the kibbutz transformed into an intentional cooperative community. The state, the kibbutz movements, and the banks had just finalized the Kibbutz Debt Settlement, which allowed kibbutzim to emerge from debt through structural reforms and asset sales. The communal village ended; the cooperative village began.

### *Salim:*

From our rented apartment in Vancouver, British Columbia, I watched as the sun broke through the rain, lighting up a patch of wet grass into a thousand sparkling shards. It pulled me back to memories of Kibbutz Hoshen after a night of rain, when the big lawn outside the dining hall turned to gold. Rafi and Hagit would bring “the good ball,” and we would gather. We would play Amodu, the circle expanding and contracting to the game's rhythm, a young heart beating on a golden lawn.

A decade has passed since I left Hoshen. I studied law, became a lawyer, and married. I grew accustomed and even respectful to my wife's grandfather's painting of a view of a church in the Canadian meadows, hung above our bed.

The other day, I received an email from Yaacov, the kibbutz's board chair. The message ended with an invitation for us, the members' children, to return.

Joseph, my childhood friend, called from Tel Aviv: “So, Salim, are we going back?” he asked, as if our decision and his were one and the same. He already knew that my wife and I were heading to Hoshen.

### *Yaacov:*

We can raise a toast. The Registrar of Cooperative Societies has approved our new cooperative bylaws. Houses are now in members' names, and everyone can chart their course. Buy yogurt if you want. Travel if you can. It is time to choose our culture instead of being drawn into events on the big lawn.

It was not easy. It felt like a collective divorce, and the distance between us grew by no longer eating together in the dining hall.

To guide members, we have prepared a Codex of gathered decisions, including appeals, eligibility for assistance, election rules, and more. This codex will be clear

and civil. Each member got a copy of the codex to keep.

Yesterday, Rachel, a board member, and I met Salim and his wife from Canada. I handed them the codex, pulled my copy from the shelf, and began reviewing all the relevant general assembly and board decisions with them. Salim's wife gazed through the window and said, “The light outside is so pretty.” Rachel smiled.

### *Tamara:*

Last Tuesday morning, I took my children to their elementary school in Acco. The press of children behind fences and asphalt still gave me a knot in my chest. I left quickly for work.

That afternoon, Avi and I met Rachel and Yaacov to explore the possibility of buying a house and joining the kibbutz. I felt their openness, warm and unhurried.

At the end, Avi, thrilled, said, “Today is Tuesday, twice blessed,” recalling the day in Genesis when God blessed twice. Rachel lowered her eyes and whispered to Yaacov, “Tell them it's a secular community.” I heard her and for the first time, I noticed a tense silence in the room.

## The Comfort and Danger of Digital Factions— A few years later

### *Salim:*

One of the first WhatsApp groups I joined, even before my family had one, was called “Comrades.” It brought together old kibbutz friends, some who had returned and others who had not. We mixed Seinfeld-style sarcasm with social and environmental activism: saving a beach from development, fighting pollution in nearby streams, and protecting ancient Phoenician ruins from being

buried under concrete.

As our frustration with the kibbutz's fading sense of community grew, our emails and appeals to members put us at odds with management, sharpening the line between "us" and "them" and deepening tensions inside.

**Tamara:**

I joined the Tu BiShvat (Trees' Holiday) planning team and sat with Salim in the now-closed dining hall, discussing where and which trees to plant. Fifteen minutes in, Joseph arrived, went straight to the tea corner, and without even a hello began trading private jokes with Salim from across the room.

Sima, a newcomer and a close friend, called, so I stepped outside. She told me about a new WhatsApp group for newcomers called "The Others," where we could speak freely and support our board candidates in the upcoming elections.

Back inside, I took charge of the music. At the event, I handed the technician a CD Avi had bought. I joined Avi and the kids by a sapling, but halfway through the second song, someone switched it to

last holiday's playlist. The embarrassment stung. It felt like someone was pushing me out. Later on, still upset, I WhatsApped Sima, "add me to the WhatsApp group."

**Yaacov:**

It is constant emails and WhatsApp messages. Why this? Why that? I reply quickly, citing the exact clause and page from our codex. Group emails are the worst; you cannot leave them unanswered. People greet me at events, yet some turn their backs when I try to approach. Was it ever like this before?

After a heated general assembly on an appeals amendment, Rachel came over as I packed my laptop.

"We have started a WhatsApp group for some of the veteran members," she said. "I want to add you."

"I am not sure," I replied.

"It is important. You can leave if you want."

That night, I saw that I'm now in a new WhatsApp group called "Saving the Kibbutz." My chest has been tight for a period now, and I understand. We are now in an internal virtual war, and some arrows have already struck me.

### The Democratic Celebration

As annual elections approached in Hoshen, verbal clashes erupted in WhatsApp groups and email lists, all in the name of free speech, democracy, and protecting the community. Members who had long been isolated without a dining hall or a shared social framework now reappeared with renewed energy.

The cold codex that governed elections seemed to welcome this democratic brawl as the liveliest cultural event in town. In "Comrades," "The Others," and "Saving the Kibbutz," the elections dominated the conversation, overflowing with unchecked, populist insults. Gentle words were drowned in the streams of distrust, fear, and anxiety.



*Kibbutz children plant a sapling.*

Photos courtesy of Dr. Nimi Langer

*The author reads the codex  
with other community members  
on the big lawn.*



One morning, during those heated days, Grandma Miriam, a celebrated former ballet dancer, rushed out of the shower to answer a beeping phone and slipped. The phone kept beeping with incoming WhatsApp alerts, while Miriam's faint voice called for help, unheard by anyone.

**Salim:**

In a community, there is no real celebration after a political victory. I was elected chair of the kibbutz's board, but new chest pain has lingered in my tired body. My friends asked me, "Why aren't you happy?" My foes would occasionally look down at me with anger as they passed by. At age 50, I underwent a catheterization to open two blocked arteries. The doctor smiled and said, "A lawyer with a heart?"

I thought about how, once, a community didn't need lawyers, and how, along this legal axis between the public and the private, which our codex or rules body lies, what seems to be missing most is a heart.

On Yom Kippur (a Jewish fasting day), standing next to Avi and Yaacov in the newly established synagogue in the kibbutz, I felt the new, quiet echoes of a real and honest connection. We prayed together, read from Nachmanides' Epistle, and for the first time, I felt the early stirrings of hope.

Hope led me to reflect on the process we underwent as a community and on what is now required to strengthen our resilience and happiness. I began to immerse myself in research and writing....

## Happiness and Community Law

The pursuit of happiness, as the improvement of a subjective sense of well-being, has always been a fundamental aspect of human experience. In recent decades, the study of happiness has evolved into a recognized field of research, making it a subject of scientific inquiry.

The model presented in the sidebar outlines the key pillars that support happiness

within an intentional cooperative community. Pillars such as trust, relationships, health (both physical and mental), and resolving disputes quickly are key to becoming happier in a community.

Throughout humanity's history, power has shifted back and forth between "community" on one end of the spectrum, and "individuals/rulers/the few" on the other. The kibbutz itself shed its collectivist roots, but we went too far and were left as a naked corporation, a nexus of contracts. The kibbutz legal system now faces a challenge: preserving the community's resilience, values, and traditions while establishing transparent and fair rules for everyone.

If we want to be happier, we must recognize that one of our most significant resources for happiness is the community itself that is in our mind and heart. We need to develop a distinct branch of legal thought within the communal setting: Community Law.

Among the many aspects of communal life that Community Law can address is the use of modern communications and

information technologies.

For example, declarations and an agreed-upon treaty can highlight the addictive and harmful long-term effects of the misuse of social media, WhatsApp groups, and emails, while appreciating IT's role in strengthening ties and connecting and supporting.

In elections, general assembly bylaws should prevent the snowball effect of subcommunities' conduct on long-term relationships, with guidelines explicitly prohibiting the use of WhatsApp groups for campaign messaging.

Boards should avoid forming internal political groups, and should not give WhatsApp and email group critiques too much weight, as it leads to more misuse of IT by the members.

Managers should not use community email/WhatsApp groups to shame a member publicly, as shaming is a harsh sanction in a community and can create rifts within it.

Members should be educated on the science of happiness and reminded periodically of the community's treaty, the risks of IT misuse, and the importance of being thankful, kind, and forgiving. This could be achieved by offering lectures and subsidized courses to board members, managers, and members alike.

## Prologue

Together yet sometimes alone, we push the big stone of well-being up the Kurkar hill of the community. We've survived suffering and division and are united by one guiding purpose: to live a good and happier life together.

Tamara, Yaacov, and Salim stand together in another Tu BiShvat tree celebration. Their cell phones are turned off and long forgotten in their pockets; they lift the spades and dig a hole. On Kibbutz Hoshen, a new pomegranate tree is being planted. It is promised to grow with love on the side of the path that leads up to the golden, big lawn. 🌿

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## Foundations of Happiness in Cooperative Communities

Psychologist Martin Seligman (2012) identified five central elements of well-being using the acronym PERMA:

- Positive Emotions
- Engagement
- Relationships
- Meaning (Mattering)
- Achievement

Researcher Tal Ben-Shahar (2021) added a sixth element: Learning and Discovery.

Seligman and Peterson (2004) also developed the theory of character strengths, which encompasses 24 universal human strengths. Each person is encouraged to identify their core strengths and build a life around them. A free online assessment helps individuals discover their character strength: [viacharacter.org/account/register](http://viacharacter.org/account/register).

Economists Richard Layard and Jan-Emmanuel De Neve (2023) emphasized key elements that support well-being within society:

- Trust
- Safety and security
- Freedom
- Volunteering
- Minimizing inequality in the well-being of community members

They highlight the high happiness cost-effectiveness of early mental health strengthening, safety as one of the most impactful public policies for increasing happiness.

Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom (1990) studied how communities successfully manage shared resources. She found that thriving communities depend, among other things, on:

- Quick and fair conflict resolution
- Inclusive governance

For more reading and podcasts to enhance the understanding of this article and its subject matter, see resources below.

## Books

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Seligman, M. E. P. (2012). *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*. Simon & Schuster.

## Podcasts and YouTube

Barrington-Leigh, C. (2019, March 27). What makes societies happy? The dawn of happiness-guided policies [Video]. YouTube. [youtu.be/tQVd7cB8HzU](https://youtu.be/tQVd7cB8HzU)

De Neve, J. E., & Layard, R. (2023, March 8). Wellbeing: science and policy [Video]. YouTube. [youtu.be/NgV3NWXtDUU](https://youtu.be/NgV3NWXtDUU). Chaired by S. Machin.

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Seligman, M. E. P. (2024, January 12). Dr. Martin Seligman on paving the way to positivity—The Positive Leadership Podcast with JP [Video]. YouTube. [youtu.be/DWVNwNCOTqU](https://youtu.be/DWVNwNCOTqU)

# The Digital Treadmill: Planned obsolescence, the Digital Desert, and other concerns

*By Rachel Freifelder*

**D**igital technology, like all technology, is a collection of tools, and like all tools, can be used well, or used to do harm. (I'm using these tools right now, to create this article and send it to the editor.) There is harm caused by making a tool, as there is from making nearly anything. There is intentional harm, and then there is the harm of creating dependence. The widespread use of a new tool can change culture, and that culture change can create dependence.

As these tools have been normalized in society, many people have come to believe that they can't meet their basic needs without using them. The troubling fact is—the more people who believe this, and embrace it, the more true it becomes, even for those who resist using the tool.

Much has been written on the car culture (including by myself; see *COMMUNITIES #207*). Many people struggle to meet their basic economic needs. Under capitalism, we need to earn money to survive, and one of the reasons people drive cars is to get to their job, especially in the US. They can't find a suitable job near where they live, or they can't afford to live near their job, or their neighborhood has no public transit, or a host of other reasons. The design of US society makes it very difficult to opt out of car culture.

Similarly, the Digital Revolution has changed our culture in ways that force people to participate for their econom-

ic survival, and make life difficult for those who attempt to opt out. And we are not just pushed to participate; we are pushed to follow the ever-accelerating tide of updates and upgrades and buy new, new, new equipment.

## The Treadmill

In an Ag Econ class in college I learned about the Technology Treadmill: Farmers (most of them) are always on the edge of bankruptcy, and the size of their tractor combine determines how much land they can farm. This is especially true for farmers who grow wheat. They often lease land that they don't own, so that they can grow and sell more wheat. They're already working dawn till dusk, and sometimes longer, so they can't work longer hours. So to farm more land, they take out a loan and buy a bigger tractor. Only problem is, all the other farmers are doing the same thing. So the market is flooded and the price of wheat goes down. To pay their family's living expenses, each farm family now has to grow even more wheat, so they need to farm more land. So they lease more land and buy a bigger combine. They are stuck on the treadmill of buying more and bigger equipment, just to survive.

## Can I opt out?

In 2003, I got my first cell phone. Why? My deep commitment to living frugally and with minimal ecological footprint means that I am generally resistant to buying new stuff and adopting new technology. My educational privilege makes it easier for



Canva AI, instructed by Rachel Freifelder

me to research and choose alternative paths. I had spent most of my life in radical activist circles. A few of my friends had gotten cell phones or pagers, but most had not. I did have an email address, which got light use, and I could access it from the computers at the public library.

I lived in a house with 12 roommates who were leftist activists but less radical than my core friends, and I was the last hold-out, without a cell phone. We still had a household land line in the living room, but no one but me used it, and when it rang, people didn't always answer it. If they did answer it and it was for me, they didn't want to come get me because my room was in the back yard. I tried running an extension to the back yard, but every time it rained, the connection got wet, and the DSL stopped working. Which didn't bother me, but bothered the roommates who were using it. So my access to land line telephone access was in conflict with their desire for the internet. I could have had the phone company install a separate line to my room, but running the line back there was expensive, and I wasn't sure how long I would live there.

So I gave in and got a cell phone. It was a Nextel i205, made by Motorola for the Nextel carrier. It looked like a smaller version of a household cordless phone. It had a 10-button numeric keypad and it was good at...making phone calls. The battery needed to be charged every three to four days. A few times it fell out of my pocket while I was riding my bike and the back came off and the battery fell out. I put it back together and it worked fine. Once I dropped it in a bucket of water. It stopped working for half an hour, while it was wet. It dried out and started working again, and then continued to work fine for years.

In 2013, when Sprint turned off all the Nextel towers, that phone was 11 years old, and it still worked just fine. But there were no cell towers for it to use. I decided to opt out. I got a land line with my phone number, a Princess phone from a neighbor, and an answering machine from Goodwill. My outgoing message let people know that I would return their call when I got home from work. It cost \$45 a month, and none of my land mates wanted to share the bill since they all had cell phones.

And I discovered how much the culture had changed. Prospective clients for my landscaping business still left messages (even with a cell phone, tradespeople can't always pick up). When I had the cell phone, I'd return calls on my lunch break. Now I had to call back as soon as I got home, tired and dirty, and then I was disturbing their dinner, or something. Social connections were even harder. Friends wanted to text to make plans. Some people wouldn't leave a message; they would just call back an hour later, when I was still...not home. Even my mother, who never had a cell phone herself, was distressed that I was suddenly unavailable during my work day.

Eventually I gave in and got a flip phone, and then a few years later a smart phone. Knowing the toxic pollution created by the manufacture of these devices, I always bought used. Which was easy since so many other people were unquestioningly upgrading...every year.

In 2022 the cell phone companies celebrated their switch to faster, more powerful "5G" transmission. I had an iPhone by then, bought used in 2019, that seemed pretty fancy to me, and that I was hoping would be my last. It worked great on the 3G network. But—the 3G cell towers were no longer available. My four-year-old iPhone, like my 19-year-old Nextel, was suddenly obsolete, even though it worked fine. Once again, I considered opting out. I don't have any reason I need to be reachable every second. I live in community, so if I need company, or help with something, I can usually find someone by walking around.

But there were reasons that having access to this tool felt like it would create ease in my life. I had decided to spend the month of February, my slow time at work, visiting friends in Guanajuato, Mexico. The work I do in winter is mostly office work, so having my laptop and smartphone would let me play digital nomad for that time. I opted in and bought myself a new iPhone 13. One advantage of upgrading to the top of the line was that I should not have to replace it again for a good while. So far, three-and-a-half years later, that still seems to be the case. But four years? I'd like to have higher standards for longevity of a product that is so costly both in terms of purchase price



Photos courtesy of Rachel Freifelder

and of environmental impact. (Speaking of impact, I also got to Guanajuato on an airplane. But that's for another article.)

### Sharing in community

One great thing about community living is the economy of scale. We save money and conserve material resources by sharing. Blueberry, where I live, is a collection of small houses in an urban neighborhood. When I first moved in, none of us had internet at home—I went to the library a few times a week with my internet to-do list and checked my email. But as internet became harder to live without, we got an account to share. It was officially tied to the most centrally-located house, and the person with the most tech skills sited the router and set up some signal boosters. There were only eight of us using it, and we had different patterns of use, so it worked out fine. Each of us paid \$5/month.

After a few years it suddenly stopped working. I learned from some more tech-savvy friends that the providers had shortened the range of the routers to prevent folks like us from sharing. So now each household has its own account. At my house we started with a plan at \$60/

## Who Broke the Pay Phone?

In my youth, I used pay phones often. Like many people, I knew the location of various pay phones that were near places I might be. If a pay phone was out of order, there were instructions posted on many pay phones asking us to call (from a different phone, of course) to notify the phone company that a repair was needed. I'd encounter a pay phone that was broken, and a few days later, it would be working again.

That was another thing that changed in 2003. One by one, the pay phones that I was in the habit of using got broken. There was a day that I was supposed to call my brother and I biked around north Oakland finding one phone after another that was physically damaged and unusable. Finally I found a place to make my call. My brother, an early adopter, said impatiently, "Why don't you get a cell phone?"

I noticed another thing that I hadn't paid attention to before: one of the new, big cell phone companies that I had never heard of before was called Verizon. And I noticed that the broken payphones no longer said "Pacific Bell." They were labeled "Verizon."

Remember the General Motors Conspiracy? In the 1930s and '40s, a group of automobile-related companies bought the trolley lines in several US cities and ripped them out, to make the private motor vehicle more appealing. I doubt that Verizon hired goons to go out and smash the pay phones; they didn't have to, as there were plenty of bored teenagers to break things for them. But I did notice that the company that was selling cell phones was also the company that owned pay phones and was no longer bothering to repair them.

—RF



month, but the price gradually crept up. Now it's \$85/month, shared between four people. And because our urban lot is long and narrow, the signal doesn't reach my detached bedroom, 80 feet from the router, so I had to run a long outdoor ethernet cable. I know we could get a "campus" network like many larger intentional communities have, but I haven't taken the initiative to research that. I imagine it would involve buying even more new equipment.

Also, we all have our own cell phones. My bill is \$30/mo—I haven't asked my housemates what they each pay for theirs. In the olden days, every collective house had a house phone. I lived in several houses of 12 people, and my college student coop had 57. If I wanted to make a call and someone else was on the phone, I waited my turn. One of our cultural changes is the expectation that we are always available, no matter where we are, no matter what we are doing.

## Voluntary culture change

Some of the dependence on these technologies seems to be deliberately created by the manufacturers. US culture has a fascination with having the next newest, shiniest thing, and marketing takes advantage of that. Get the new iPhone 37, shinier and sparklier than ever!

But I've encountered complicity in many seemingly well-intentioned circles.

**City-funded programs:** The city of Portland has a Bureau of Sustainability, and for a few years funded a program called Urban Growth Bounty, which helped sustainability educators like myself to advertise our classes on their website. I went to create a posting for my classes and ran into trouble with their online form. I called and a friendly person tried to help me. We determined that their form only worked on the most recent version of their browser. I tried to update my browser and found that the new version of the browser wouldn't run on my operating system. So I tried to update my operating system and found that the update wouldn't install on my laptop because it was too old. I tried to do it at the library, but their hardware was also not up to the latest software. My laptop was working just fine, but to use this program funded by my local government and my property taxes, I would need to buy new equipment. (Fortunately, the nice person on the phone was willing to enter my data manually.)

**Security culture in activist circles:** Before the digital revolution, people who wanted to have a private conversation would go to a location that was private. If privacy was really important, face-to-face was always best. Now, people want to have private conversations over the internet. To me this seems like an oxymoron. But we're still trying. People who are concerned that a regular telephone call might not be private are using digital messaging applications to create "internet privacy." There is a great deal of debate about which are the most secure. More and more conversations, both one-on-one or in groups, are happening over Signal, WhatsApp, Discord, etc. These "apps" also work on a desktop computer, so in theory one could use a computer at the library if one didn't own one. But to set up the account, you need to first set it up on a smart phone, link it to that smart phone's phone number, then link the desktop account to the smart-phone account. So every time we default to Signal to share information about our event, we are excluding our comrades who choose to refrain from smart phones. The problem? So much information is now in all these Signal chats that if a person opts out, they need a friend or two to be willing to keep them updated...or they are opting out of this social and activist world.

And I realize that whatever challenges I may be having with tech, they are far worse for many others. With the intersecting privileges of education, fair skin, and a modest access to capital, I can more easily choose which technologies to use, or refrain from. If I "opt out" it's a philosophical choice. I also have some choice in my livelihood, though as I age, some doors close which were open in the past. I'm trying to quit doing landscape maintenance, and my new website will tell people about my consulting services.

What about people whose access is more limited? Yes, there are still people who are computer-illiterate, or don't own one for financial reasons. Yes, there are elders

who have had the same land line for 50 years. Telephone companies were long considered to be a public utility—“Ma Bell.” If your power was out, your phone still worked. But no more. In some areas, home phone service is transmitted through... an internet connection.

## The Digital Desert

Some lower-income neighborhoods are “digital deserts”—there are few cell towers and spotty service. On the one hand, people in those neighborhoods are being less exposed to radiation than those in neighborhoods with more cell towers. On the other hand, they have essentially no access to the communication technology that might help them to earn a living or get ahead economically. And yes, these tools are incredible useful for finding work, information, connections, etc.

You’ve probably heard of a “Food Desert”—an urban neighborhood where there is little healthy food available to purchase. What constitutes a food desert is a matter of opinion, of course, but it generally means that there is little to no fresh produce available. Often the same low-income neighborhood is both a “food desert” and a “digital desert.”

Let’s remember the key differences between food and digital technology. Our need for food is a biological fact, older than the fossil record. And correspondingly, the skill to grow or forage our own food is as old as humanity. The solutions for food justice can be decentralized, community based, and low cost. People can grow their own food. If they need resources we’re talking about compost, seeds, water, and hand tools. In low-income neighborhoods, many people garden, and many people are recently from an agricultural background. Access to land is sometimes the tricky part, but every neighborhood has at least a schoolyard, some empty lots, some back yards. There are scores of small, grassroots community programs either bringing food, fighting for land access, or helping people to grow their own food. It takes hard work, but it can be completely independent of large-scale capitalism or government.

On the other hand, you can’t DIY your way out of a digital desert. No person or small grassroots community group can make their own internet or cell tower. And our dependency on digital technology is a very recent social construct.

There are government programs to help low-income people pay for cell phones and home internet connections, which shows us how clearly this access is now tied to economic survival.

Some smart, nerdy people with tech skills and a healthy critique of the treadmill have been trying to keep digital participation accessible while also working to slow the trend of planned obsolescence. Right to Repair laws are one example. Right to Repair laws grant consumers and independent repair businesses access to parts, tools, and information needed to fix electronic devices and equipment. California, Colorado, Minnesota, New York, Massachusetts, and Oregon are among the states that have passed comprehensive Right to Repair legislation. Additionally, Washington enacted a Right to Repair law in 2025. Free Geek (Freegeek.org), a nonprofit here in Portland, is dedicated to community service and education for “digital equity.” They help low-income people and recent immigrants get equipment and learn to use it, with classes in several languages. They offer repairs, recycling, and a thrift store for used electronics.

Like car culture, digital culture has been adopted, normalized and accelerated by a combination of good intentions, capitalist greed, and voluntary social participation. We most likely can’t get rid of it, but we can bring a critical lens to its ascendancy in human culture. 🍷

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*Rachel Freifelder has lived in a diversity of intentional communities and was a co-founder of Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage. Since 2007 she has lived, farmed, and shared many meals with land mates at Blueberry ([ic.org/blueberry](http://ic.org/blueberry)). Her first email address was [rachelf@lbl.gov](mailto:rachelf@lbl.gov), in 1988. She used Canva AI to make the lead photo for this article, her first ever use of AI technology.*



## Diana Leaf Christian

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“Your conflict class—including your advice specific to our community’s culture, history, and needs—helped us understand what was happening, helping us come up with viable solutions.”

“Your wise input, based on extensive experience with other communities about how to move forward in particularly challenging situations was invaluable in saving us suffering, time, and energy.”

“We can already see dynamics shifting in a good direction.”

—Melanie Rubin, Riverbed Ranch Community, Utah

“I’m now completely ‘sold’ on Sociocracy—as well as delighted, uplifted, and inspired.”

“In fact, hardly anything has ever inspired me more. You are a wonderful teacher and it’s pure joy to see you in action.”

—Elsa Weber, Monterey, CA

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# Perspectives from a Tech-Driven Community: Code, Care, and Regeneration

By Jillian Hovey, Roberto Valenti, Simon Quarmby, and Laura van Wijngaarden



Aerial view of Liminal Village, Ascoli Piceno, Italy.

Photos courtesy of Jillian Hovey

## An Eco-Tech Hub

By Jillian Hovey

Liminal Village is an intentional community in central Italy, a 20-minute drive inland from the east coast on the Adriatic Sea. While living in Amsterdam, cofounders Roberto Valenti and Laura van Wijngaarden envisioned a living place where personal growth, technology, and nature could meet. They found a three-hectare property with three houses in Roberto’s home province of Ascoli Piceno, and in 2018, they made the big move there with their newborn child. They then began the eco development of the site.

Roberto had the vision of an eco-tech hub, where technology is guided by the patterns of nature. As one way of bringing this desire to life, he organized time at Liminal Village in “Lunations.” This is the term for the lunar cycles which run from one new moon to the next. Guests are encouraged to arrive with the new moon and remain for a “moonth.” This connects people with a common natural arc of time, where we follow what Roberto calls “the progress bar in the sky.” Because the entire planet is under the same moon, this offers a simple yet profound way to align our working rhythms, whether together on site or collaborating remotely.

I have lived and worked at Liminal Village during several lunations over the past four years. I have witnessed the usual tensions that arise in any community, as well as challenges particular to the community’s focus on technology. Many who come to Liminal Village are primarily drawn by its tech work and regenerative context, but do not necessarily come from the communities movement. Visitors often have limited experience of living and

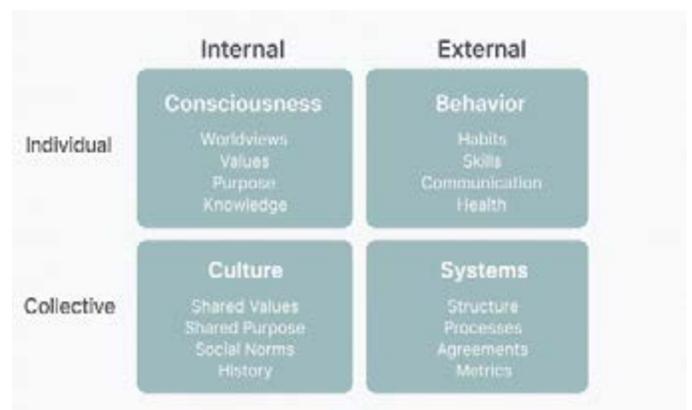
working closely with others, and are therefore earlier in the process of developing the intra- and interpersonal skills fundamental to intentional community life. This is a strong contributor to the challenging community dynamics that have occurred.

### Integral Framework

As well as working closely with Roberto, a few months after my first stay I began mentoring Laura, and we have been on a deep journey together ever since. Early on, we engaged with the “Four Quadrants” of Ken Wilber’s Integral Theory (*see diagram*). This model illuminates the often-hidden *Interior* dimensions of our *Personal* and *Collective* lives—realms of feelings, values, and culture. These aspects of our existence are overshadowed by Western culture’s emphasis on the *Exterior* world of science, economics, and technology.

The Four Quadrants gave Laura a language for what she was sensing, and also for what she had been suppressing in her life, and in Liminal Village. Bringing this “other side” of reality into view connected Laura with more of her *whole self*, and helped her find her voice in the community. Laura’s inputs and feedback did not always align with the values or habits familiar to the mostly male-identifying tech folks, yet she has profoundly influenced the growth of Liminal Village’s frame of reference toward an Integral perspective. This expansion to include interior aspects of people and groups also helped us understand that technology should reflect not just external systems, but also the inner values and cultures that shape how we live together.

This article shares perspectives on the journey of Liminal Village from three others besides me: cofounders Roberto and Laura, along with long-term community participant Simon Quarmby.



The Four Quadrants of the Integral Framework by Ken Wilber.

# Computer-Aided Communities

By Roberto Valenti

I consider myself a conscious technologist, as my ongoing focus revolves around developing technologies that serve life. I have often stood in the liminal space where opposites meet and transform—the spaces between technology and nature, individual and collective, tradition and innovation, structure and flow. These intersections are at the heart of Liminal Village—the “living lab” I cofounded seven years ago with my wife Laura. Indeed, our marriage embodies this dynamic of the liminal space between two different entities—two people searching for common ground, and learning from each other along the way. I am humbled by what our journey has brought us, and glad to share some of these learnings in this collective article. My aim is neither to promote nor to reject technology, but to redefine its role—consciously integrating it into communities so that it serves life, instead of enslaving it or aiding the destruction of the planet.

## Affordances and Requirements

Every technology carries both *affordances* (what it makes possible) and *requirements* (what it demands in return). A solar panel for example, affords “free” renewable energy, but very few people could build one themselves—an entire industrial chain

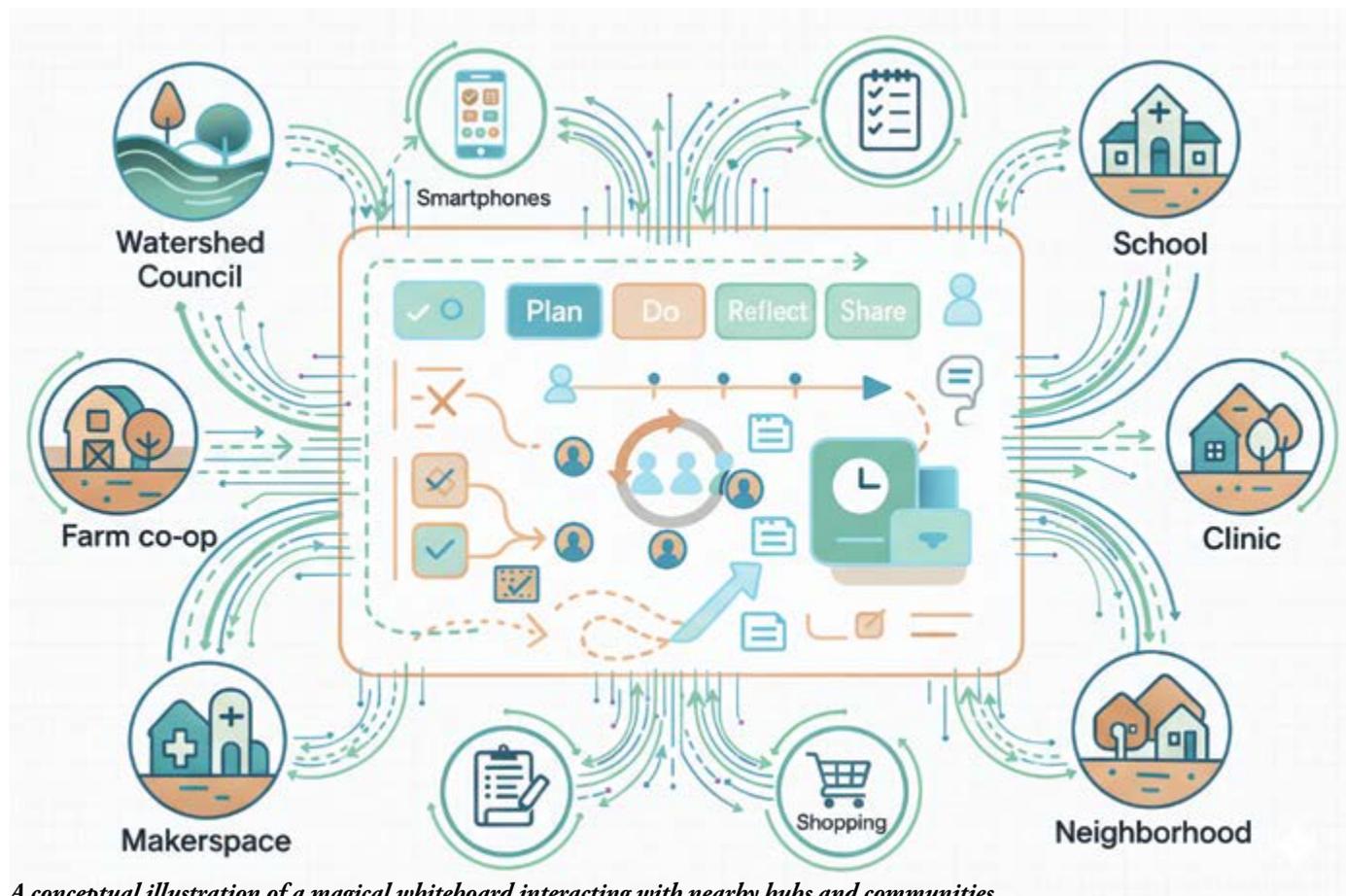
is required to produce it. This distinction matters because what looks like *independence* (a solar panel on a roof) is in fact *dependent* on vast supply chains and infrastructures.

The same is true for *social technologies*—models, frameworks, shared routines, and patterns of interaction, such as Nonviolent Communication, Liberating Structures, or Sociocracy. These tools *afford* immense value by improving collaboration, deepening trust, and making collective decisions more effective. Yet they also *require* teaching, learning, and ongoing practice, often with the support of a trained facilitator.

Even something as simple as a whiteboard in a community kitchen is a form of social technology. It requires people to use it, and it affords coordination of meals, tasks, and schedules with nothing more than a marker and an erasable surface. Low-cost and easy to adopt, such tools quickly become indispensable once a community makes them part of daily life.

## “Magical Whiteboards”

Now imagine this simple whiteboard evolving into a “magical whiteboard”—a shared canvas of action and memory, where items and intentions sync seamlessly within and across communities. Such a tool could unlock powerful affordances, such as shared visibility, real-time coordination, and a collective memory. This technology could cut duplication of effort, facilitate cross-community learning, and amplify local signals into the wider network—helping weave countless small actions into coherent, large-scale impact.



A conceptual illustration of a magical whiteboard interacting with nearby hubs and communities.

AI-generated by Gemini

A “magical whiteboard” requires electricity, internet, and digital devices. If those requirements are already met (for example, smartphones in most people’s pockets, wireless connectivity), and it makes use of an easy-to-use touch or speech interface, the cost of unlocking these higher affordances is relatively small. Yet, even when the infrastructure is available, the cultural requirements of a tool can be more significant than its technical demands: tools, once introduced, begin to reshape patterns of behavior.

## When Tools Shape Culture

During one of our lunations, we experimented with a mutual credit system, tracking exchanges of effort on a simple whiteboard with pluses and minuses. It was low-tech, transparent, and easy to use. Yet a significant shift occurred in our temporary community: once they began being accounted for, tasks which previously were seemingly offered as spontaneous gifts now started to feel transactional rather than part of the natural flow of community life.

This realization was a wake-up call: even the simple act of “accounting” can have an effect on people’s behaviour and community dynamics. A mutual credit system might be a great replacement for money between distant communities that cannot directly see one another’s contributions, but within a close-knit circle, it risked corroding the very culture of trust and generosity we hoped to nurture.

## Fragility and Fallbacks

The real question is not whether a technology is “good” or “bad,” but what the trade-offs are. Do the affordances justify the requirements? What new dependencies are created; what freedoms are gained; what culture does it foster? And crucially: what happens if the systems fail? Technological adoption should always come with a fallback. If the internet goes down, a community can still use a simple whiteboard; if the solar panel fails, there should be another way to meet essential energy needs. Without such fallback layers, technologies can precipitate dependencies and points of fragility.

The lack of fallbacks, the technological requirements, and un-intuitive interfaces are all potential explanations of why many intentional communities instinctively keep digital technology at arm’s length. I believe there is also a deeper reason for the rejection: today’s digital technologies (social media, online mar-

ketplaces, devices, and communication apps) are deliberately designed around economic incentives that drive attention capture, data extraction, planned obsolescence, and vendor lock-in. Furthermore, without truly “cradle-to-cradle” systems of production and re-use—where devices are modular, designed to be returned, easily melted down, and reshaped into new versions with minimal resource loss—the environmental cost of churning out “shiny new” products each year is staggering. Instead of closing the loop, most devices are discarded, polluting, and wasting the rare minerals, energy, and labor embedded in them.

The current social and environmental costs of digital technologies are significant. Yet these burdens are not inevitable requirements of the technology itself, but the result of the underlying profit drive which has created it. The digital ecosystem was optimized for extraction and revenue rather than well-being, which turns humans into buying addicts, and their attention and relationships into the product. Not everyone is willing to accept that bargain.

## Money as Operating System

I have witnessed first-hand how the profit drive can undermine the intention of tech development. During my PhD, collaborations across groups broke down over funding and questions of who would get credit for the work. Later, in the AI companies that spun off from my academic work, financial pressures pulled our innovations away from what we truly wanted to create—toward “whatever makes money.” The good I had hoped to create was repeatedly warped by market forces.

The pervasive “requirement” for profit made me realize that *the monetary system may be the most mind-controlling technology of all!* It acts as the de facto operating system of society and much of our relationship with the Earth—shaping our choices, actions, and behaviors. Money affords us a simple way to trade, but at devastating costs: our interdependence is hidden, organizations become competing silos, ancient forests are cut, seas are over-fished, unrecyclable goods are produced, and ecosystems are polluted. This is not out of overt desire, but because survival within the system demands it.



*“Money makes the world go around,” but results in extractive behaviour, wealth gaps, and environmental degradation, thus leaving human and ecological well-being impoverished.*



*People using technology inappropriately, disconnecting from a typically social situation.*

AI-generated by Gemini

AI-generated by Gemini



*The networked locations of regenerativa.earth around the Tronto River watershed, Italy.*



*The holonic dashboard on a fridge—a “magical whiteboard” showcasing the active tasks in our family and in our related communities at the local and global level.*



*The holonic dashboard showcasing local tasks and events.*



*The holonic dashboard showcasing tasks surfaced at the watershed level.*

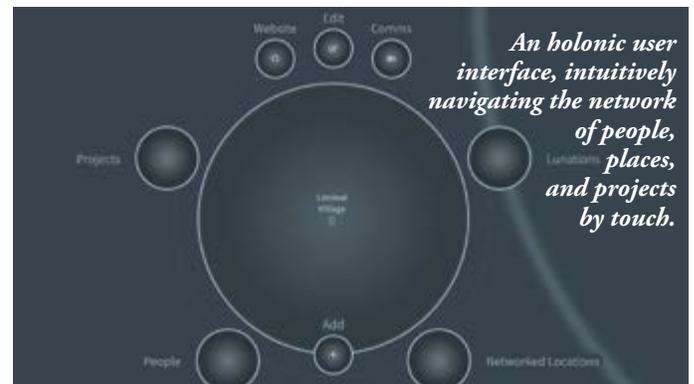
## Regenerative Economics

Realizing the depth of today’s economic distortions made me question whether another path was possible. Could we design economic technologies that, instead of eroding our values, would actually uphold them? Imagine rewriting the rules so that economies are grounded not in arbitrary commodities, but in what we truly cherish: regeneration, care, education, sharing, and free time. In such a values-based system, doing the “right thing” would no longer be a matter of personal ethics alone, but also the natural outcome of a just economic design. What we now dismiss as “externalities” (care work, volunteering, ecological stewardship) would finally be recognized and rewarded. *The health of our relationships, our ecosystems, and our inner lives would become the true currencies of wealth*, weaving resilience and meaning back into daily life.

Liminal Village has been a living laboratory for this vision. We designed and tested social and digital systems. We lived in the feedback loops of using our own technology in daily life (“eating our own dog food,” as developers say), celebrating breakthroughs, stumbling into limits, and always learning. Each experiment revealed something about what strengthens community and what can corrode it. The goal was never just to build tools, but to embed our values into habits and agreements that help us thrive together while we heal the planet.

## Designing for Interdependence

For too long, technology has reinforced the illusion of self-



*An holonic user interface, intuitively navigating the network of people, places, and projects by touch.*

sufficiency. Re-imagined, digital technology could instead make our interdependence visible and workable—supporting trust, enabling values-aligned communication, and allowing communities to coordinate across scales, from households to global networks. This is *technology in service of cooperation*, not isolation.

At [regenerativa.earth](https://regenerativa.earth) we are in the early stages of developing a computer-aided, fractal network of people, projects, and places, focused on Integral regeneration. Our digital tools will allow needs and resources to be shared openly, so coordination becomes possible. Families, schools, and associations could list under-utilized items, borrow, lend, or co-buy resources through trusted local groups. Over time, these exchanges could evolve into community-owned businesses and infrastructure, and eventually into decentralized supply chains, where citizens and coop-

eratives pool resources, track flows, and share rewards. What may begin as a simple Telegram bot becomes the scaffolding of a new economy—transparent, cooperative, and regenerative.

Anyone who has lived in community is familiar with the operational load: meals to prepare, spaces to maintain, repairs to make, inventories to track, people to support, etc. Often this physical and mental load is carried by a few, who continuously (willingly or unwillingly) anchor this work, which can lead to imbalance and to tensions, and ultimately to community breakdown.

Here technology can play a vital role. Rather than centralizing control, it can distribute visibility, coordination, and responsibility across the whole. Our “magical whiteboard” could evolve into a cybernetic guidance system within and between communities with shared social DNA, actively proposing synergetic step-by-step pathways toward common goals—one clear, actionable task at a time. In this way, the same principles that link villages to bio-regions can also help distribute the work of cooking, repairing, and caring. Our meetings then become less about logistics, and more about connection, reflection, and learning.

### Choosing Consciously

From the moment our ancestors first shaped stone into tools, technology has walked beside us—an intimate companion in our becoming. We mold it, and it molds us. The art lies in discernment: to use technology as a tool, not a weapon; as scaffold, not a cage; as a guide, not an overlord. Will we allow profit-driven systems to keep writing the code of our lives, or shall we reclaim technology as an ally of regeneration, weaving care, creativity, and community into the fabric of our shared future?

I carry the conviction that a computer-aided regenerative economy can catalyze a world where sustainable lifestyles and initiatives thrive, designed to meet the needs of both people and the planet. We invite you to step into this vision with us. Whether you are a coder, a creative, a builder, or a weaver, there is a place on our “magical whiteboard” for your gifts, and each contribution is an opportunity to access the living laborato-

ries where this future is already being practiced. Together, we can weave the living laboratories of today into the regenerative economies of tomorrow.

## From the "Belly of the Beast" to Liminal Village

By Simon Quarmby

Perhaps like many reading this article, I once lived a very different life—disconnected from nature and community, embroiled in the callous churn of competition, consumerism, and convenience. In 2018, at the pinnacle of my career working for Big Tech in London, I ejected myself from the “belly of the beast,” in search of a more meaningful life.

After the trauma of my exit from the corporate world, which was a time plagued with immense stress, depression, loneliness, and lack of purpose, I ran away. I vowed never to return to corporate life, and exiled the parts of me that I associated with my breakdown. To rationalize all of this, I told myself I’d taken very early retirement.

I had the financial means to travel. After spending a lifetime in the city, I sought out a tropical climate and a taste of Latin culture. I fell in love with a beautiful Colombian woman, who aspired to build up her Airbnb business on the picturesque Caribbean coast of Santa Marta. That felt good to me, and so I spent the next three years escaping my nightmare by living her dream. We were successful, but something was missing—I felt trapped in paradise. Like many, my experience of the pandemic was one of awakening to the challenges our species was facing, and I felt called to seek out my own purpose in service to something greater.

So I upped and left—throwing myself into the unknown again. On my seeking journey, I experienced what it was like to



*Simon with Mama Alejo and family in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta as we forged an alliance for regeneration in the bioregion.*



*Our regenerative alliance gathered a crowd of local activists and indigenous leaders from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta bioregion as we worked together to map relationships.*



*The paradise view from the Airbnb we managed on the Caribbean Coast.*



*A gathering with some leaders from the three remaining tribes of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, in Mendiguaca.*

live in community and sought out regenerative projects—first in hostels and coliving arrangements, then on an agroforestry project in the jungle; a plastic recycling initiative in Panama; and eventually seeding a bioregional movement and forming alliances with the indigenous tribes in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Through plant medicine, I experienced the dissolution of my own ego, tasted paradise through the eyes of nature, bore witness to my own greed, and glimpsed the world through indigenous tradition and values. I began to see nature and community as important pillars in my life.

### Finding Regenerative Finance

In the latter part of my time in London, I had become seduced by the dream of a “crypto-utopia”—the vision that blockchain and digital currencies could liberate people from broken institutions and create a fairer world. As my thesis matured, I had begun to imagine ways in which our technology, particularly our financial system, could be re-deployed for good, in service to nature and community—all we had to do was measure and value the right things. I stumbled upon the concept of “regenerative finance,” or “ReFi,” where many were trying to do just that: tokenizing tree planting, or even minting non-fungible tokens (NFTs) to represent land parcels as stores of ecological value.

Even as I studied permaculture, I was looking for patterns: how could we learn from nature to build more coherent, regenerative systems for society; how could we resolve the apparent paradoxes between the individual and the collective, freedom and responsibility, spirituality and technology...nature and the machine? I found hope in the bioregional movement through Joe Brewer, who became a good friend. He helped me understand that where the “Crypto Bros” were trying to make our systems “trust-less,” the key to social and environmental regeneration was in nurturing “trust-full” relationships. Reducing everything to a number so that our broken economy could see it was not the answer.

I wrestled with post-capitalist, post-colonial, and even post-monetary thought, all in search of answers, which seemed to be outside of our grasp. The question kept arising: “If our socio-economic framework was truly broken—our way of being and level of consciousness so misaligned with nature—if so many were suffering, then what was the right way to live, and how could we ever reach the scale needed for a global transition?”

### Prophecy of the Eagle and the Condor

In the Prophecy of the Eagle and the Condor—a legend woven into the heritage of many indigenous peoples of the Americas—the Eagle embodies masculine energies: analytical thought, logic, reason, industrial might, and technological advancement. Conversely, the Condor symbolizes feminine energies, encompassing care, compassion, connection to the Earth, and community.

This ancient prophecy foretold a period, beginning approximately 500 years ago, when the masculine and feminine energies would fall out of balance. This era of the ascendancy of the Eagle coincided with the European incursion into the Americas, and the subsequent colonization and subjugation of indigenous cultures by industrial and technological progress. The Eagle’s dominance privileged the abstraction of value, the objectification and exploitation of nature and society, and the prioritization of profit over care. According to the prophecy, we have now entered a new age of restoration and balance, where the Eagle and the Condor will soar together once again.

Of course, at this time in our human journey, it’s easy to perceive the machine of our economy as a perpetual, relentless engine of growth, externalising cost to nature with disregard for care and community, still putting profit over purpose, desecrating the sacred in service to the myth of progress. Modern technology, including AI, is accelerating at an exponential pace, and has been shaped by these very forces. There are, however, seeds of hope: the evolution of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), the re-emergence of the bioregional movement, and the success of regenerative projects all over the world. And where our technology is put in service to this care, we can begin to imagine these two majestic birds once again flying in the same sky.

### Liminal Village

In 2023, I had my first stint at Liminal Village in Italy, and I’ve spent nine months of the last two years there. During that first stay, Roberto had started to introduce to the community some of the technology he had been building. It was an exchange: Roberto and Laura were offering the infrastructure of Liminal Village and dedicating their time to hosting us, and in return asked only for a contribution to the grocery bill and our participation in this experiment in post-monetary, post-capitalist life. I was excited to be a part of it!



Initially, without the context of Roberto's greater vision, some of the technology felt intrusive and unnecessary to me. The idea of using a phone application to "appreciate" someone was well intentioned, but it felt unnatural—much better to say thank you to someone in person, or just return the favor, I thought. Managing community tasks through Telegram, rather than with a whiteboard and pen, also felt like overkill. The shopping list feature was quite neat, though, and really helped us to coordinate meeting everyone's needs asynchronously.

The talks amongst the people we attracted were the most stimulating, most revolutionary conversations I'd ever experienced. The works of Joanna Macy, Buckminster Fuller, Jacque Fresco, Eleanor Ostrom, Barbara Max Hubbard, and Ken Wilber were all referenced as we imagined a world beyond the grip of late-stage capitalism. Our conversations were so inspiring that we often recorded them to capture the magic, and to be able to use the materials in our work. We have used our conversations to develop documents, and there is much more potential down the road to use that information for other purposes in growing the regenerative philosophy that we are stewarding.

There were always people coming and going—no permanent residents except the cofounder family. It made sense that we used technology to capture the necessary protocols and patterns needed to maintain a happy camp; otherwise knowledge would be lost when people moved on. The prototype Roberto had been building for community organisation became scaffolding for new arrivals, to help them find their feet and get into the rhythm of community life as they participated in chores around the site. We had a role system for recurring duties like cooking and cleaning, as well as daily tasks on the farm. This could have been managed on a whiteboard, but this simple interface on the Telegram app worked quite well and saved us time. People adjusted. Most embraced it, and for those that didn't there were no real consequences.

### AI Councils

I also brought my own pieces to the village; my own ideas. That year I had started to play around, cautiously, with AI, using a Large Language Model (LLM) through ChatGPT. My intuition told me that the "context window" (the limited span of text the model can hold in memory during an interaction) was a lens through which we could shape the AI itself: not only its responses, but also its perspective, character, and way of seeing the world. Instead of accept-

ing the default "helpful assistant" that OpenAI had programmed, I wanted AI to look through other lenses—through the eyes of "Gaia," for example, or from an indigenous worldview, or even as the "Devil's Advocate," rather than the sycophantic character that OpenAI has created to pander to every dream.

I created a whole pantheon of archetypes, such as The Alchemist and The Fool, each offering a distinct way of seeing the world. These archetypes gave users different vantage points—inviting them to question assumptions, discover blind spots, and explore ideas from multiple dimensions rather than a single, narrow frame. My AI "Ecosystem Council" was shaped to see outside the Overton window (the range of ideas a society considers politically or socially acceptable), helping people imagine new paradigms beyond capitalism and communism, and also adding a spiritual or regenerative lens.

At Liminal Village, we extended this vision into the idea of an AI Council that could embody diverse kinds of knowledge and wisdom—drawing on historical, academic, and archetypal perspectives. We pictured AI not as a corporate product, but as a cultural artifact at the heart of each community, like a Totem Pole—something shaped by the people themselves. This stood in contrast to the "Techno-Feudal" overlords of Silicon Valley, beholden to the "Financial Priests" of Wall Street, extracting more and more of our attention, energy, and life force in service of profit and power. Instead, we imagined Totem Poles that could speak to one another, coordinating knowledge and resources in nested layers: from communities, to watersheds, to entire bioregions—aligning our own resources in service to life, beauty, and freedom.

As AI accelerates, every day seems to open up possibilities that we had once thought were merely science fiction, and it is rapidly entering our lives right now. And yet this technology has been trained within a paradigm of separation: separation from one another, and separation from nature. The monumental shift required to change both our systems and our consciousness is almost impossible to imagine...but we have to try. And it can start with a simple Telegram app, mapping micro-signals of needs and contributions, nested across scales. Add some rhythm and a pulse, like the periodicity of lunations. Could we build protocols for our collective wisdom to flourish rather than platforms for artificial intelligence to perpetuate our stupidity?

## My Seven Years Inside a Tech-Driven Community

By *Laura van Wijngaarden*

Life at Liminal Village has been an experiment in how people and technology might live side by side. Beyond our home base, we carry a vision of a network of interdependent communities, each caring for its own place while staying connected through tools that guide the flow of resources, roles, and support to where they are most needed.

While envisioning this regenerative future, we are also living in a community held together by countless invisible threads—raising children, tending the land, maintaining the household, and tending to the coordination of meals, supplies, and other daily needs for guests. For the past seven years, much of this weaving of daily life has been my work. While my partner and cofounder Roberto has shared in some of it, his focus has been mostly on welcoming the guests and stewarding aspects of the physical infrastructure and built environment, the vision of the project, and the technology to support it.

Because of this division of focus, community life here has emerged from two different threads: the digital fabric of intellectual discussions, screens, and systems design; and the embodied rhythms of household and childcare management, and caring for the land and the animals. This split between the digital and the embodied has left me immersed, sometimes willingly, sometimes with resistance, in a long-term experiment where I often found myself standing between vision and reality: bridging code and care, and navigating the gap between idealistic plans and the very human needs no tool can fix.

### Spiral Dynamics and Internal Family Systems

Two frameworks have become part of our community “operating system” over the past few years: Spiral Dynamics, and Internal Family Systems (IFS). Spiral Dynamics is a model of human values and cultural evolution, often described through colors which progress up a spiral, where each color represents a worldview. For example: Blue for order and tradition; Orange for achievement and progress; Green for community and equality; Yellow for seeing connections across whole systems; and Turquoise for working together for holistic, planetary care.

As Diana Leafe Christian describes in “Spiral Dynamics—Which Reality Do We Live In?” (COMMUNITIES #206, Summer 2025), the model helps explain why people in communities may operate from very different assumptions about truth, conflict, or cooperation, and why tensions often arise between First-Tier and Second-Tier perspectives. An important distinction in Spiral Dynamics is between First-Tier values (from Beige at the bottom to Green at the top of the First Tier), where each tends to see their own worldview as the only valid one; and Second-Tier values (Yellow and Turquoise), which can recognize and integrate the strengths of all stages.

The other social technology we draw on is Internal Family Systems. IFS is a therapeutic framework that views each of us as made up of many different “Parts”—inner voices or sub-personalities that carry emotions, memories, and roles. Some parts try to protect us, others carry old wounds. At the center is the Self: a core of calm, compassion, and clarity that can guide healing and integration.

Together, these two models give us the frameworks and language of social technologies to navigate both our collective dynamics and our inner lives. They have been invaluable in helping us understand and work through the tensions that naturally arise in community life.

### Tech and Connection to Our Parts

Digital technology weaves itself into our days—sometimes in



*Laura (center) at Liminal Village, which has mostly hosted (tech-oriented) men, with a recent gradual increase in female participation.*

harmony, other times overshadowing what matters most. We are still learning how to use technology in ways that support rather than separate us. Screens can feel safer than the vulnerability of real-life connections, especially for those of us healing attachment wounds. At Liminal Village, we have experimented with tech curfews and quiet evening activities to reduce screen time, yet digital engagement is deeply rooted in the lives of many who come here.

Over our time at Liminal Village, we have come to see that technology has a way of mirroring our inner hopes and fears. Through the lens of IFS, we can see that the tools we create can reflect parts of us that long for safety or relief from chaos—sometimes clinging to the hope that the “right” tool will finally bring safety, meaning, or control. When such creations stem from fragmented Parts, there is a strong drive to avoid discomfort. This narrows the field of possibility and reinforces the short-term fixes that keep First-Tier patterns entrenched.

In contrast, when the architecture of our systems is rooted in integrative, Second-Tier thinking—holding paradox, stimulating growth, and deepening connection—technology can instead serve wholeness. An example of the kind of technology I imagine serving wholeness is one that helps us coordinate daily life in community: making labor visible, distributing it more equitably, and alleviating the emotional burden of delegation, while enabling feedback loops so that labor dynamics can evolve in real time. In this way, outer systems of coordination mirror inner states of wholeness, trust, and shared intention.

### Use of AI

When technology becomes our main strategy for managing life, including uncertainty, we risk slipping from intentional use into unconscious reliance. This overdependence can lead to a stagnation of growth—personally, spiritually, and collectively—because challenge and discomfort are what move us forward. Tools like ChatGPT are designed to be safe, steering away from conflict or emotional tension. This encoding of safety and likability means such tools rarely challenge us, and are not the most effective partners in getting us to where we aspire to go.

In writing this article, I struggled to use AI in a balanced way. A dominant story (need) that I had was for AI to support me, com-

ing from Parts of me that are insecure about not being a professional writer, and writing in a non-native language (I am Dutch and Italian). But over-reliance on AI risks reinforcing bias, turning us into passive consumers rather than active learners. The digital “Yes Man” effect of AI weakens resilience, and online “bubbles” of like-minded groups make us more divided. Amplified by the Orange meme’s focus on “me” and personal success, AI can become an over-indulgent parent—soothing every discomfort until we lose the ability to face challenge or connection. If it is to support growth, AI must challenge us, not just mirror and coddle us.

## The Deep Encodement of Patriarchy

To understand how we arrived at our current state of systemic breakdown and the search for new paradigms, we must also look at the deeper architecture of the systems we have built. The Industrial Revolution (1760–1840), extending into the mid-19th century, and the Age of Technology (mid-20th century to today) both reflect the imprint of patriarchy, which privileged rationality, hierarchy, and control over relationship, emotion, and care. These expressions continue to shape not only our institutions, but also the tools we design and the assumptions we code into them.

The shift we need is toward post-patriarchal, life-centered paradigms that value balance, reciprocity, and mutual thriving. This is not simply a reversal of patriarchy, but a deeper integration of opposites—bringing together structure and flow, logic and intuition, individuality and interdependence. Systems like open-source collaboration and mutual aid networks already reflect this movement into regenerative paradigms.

## Encoding the Feminine and Restoring Balance

As we enter the next phase of technological evolution, the systems we build must be rooted in values such as care, reciprocity, relational awareness, ecological responsibility, and emotional intelligence. The wounds of domination and disconnection must be acknowledged so we don’t unconsciously encode them into the next systems we build. This also means addressing the

feminine wound—the long history of Her voice being excluded, silenced, or distorted by dominant systems. Her anger and grief are valid. But if She turns away, Her silence becomes part of the code, not Her voice.

For centuries, women’s voices in science and technology have been largely dismissed or ignored. To speak from that lineage is to disrupt the norm that tech must be neutral, rational, and explained in linear, male-coded terms. When a woman brings intuition, care, or critique into the heart of the conversation—not as an aside but as a design principle—she reclaims her voice and redefines what’s possible. If we are to build a future where technology and nature thrive together in harmony, both masculine and feminine wisdom must be present.

Restoring balance between the brain’s hemispheres is part of this harmony—between the analytical focus often linked with the left and the relational awareness often linked with the right brain. While powerful, today’s AI, like ChatGPT, leans heavily on the former, deepening our disconnection from the body, the senses, and intuitive ways of knowing.

Communities offer an antidote to this disconnection, a powerful container for the transformation from fragmented, extractive, and patriarchal systems, toward more integrated, life-centered, and relational ways of living and designing technology. They offer fertile ground to connect technology more deeply to human wholeness, testing and evolving the tech in service of real needs, shared rhythms, and mutual care.

## Stepping into the Light

I have been working closely with my mentors, healing old wounds, and updating the IFS Managers that were trying to keep me safe, I have found a more authentic expression and begun to connect with my calling. Through the privilege of family support, I have purchased a new property which will be a holistic healing centre for people in our global regenerative community. The focus will be inner practices and the stewardship of place and relationships, which is an aspect of my transition from an anesthesiologist in the hospital, to becoming a holistic



*Finding my voice: first time being a co-facilitator with Roberto at an event outside of Liminal Village.*



*Growing a crop of next-generation children.*

medical doctor in the local and bioregional community. I have named the property Casa Selva—*selva* meaning “forest” in Italian, and also evoking the image of the “wild woman”: an untamed force, long-suppressed by patriarchy, yet still alive with the raw vitality and resilience needed for regeneration.

This is not the end of my journey with Liminal Village. I still live there, and will be involved for potentially the rest of my life. Casa Selva is an emerging companion project which complements Liminal Village’s focus on community-scale experimentation and technology. Together, they are two nodes in a wider network—one tending the soil of personal and relational healing, the other testing systems and tools for collective coordination. Each strengthens the other, for regeneration must happen both within and between us—in relationships as well as in visionary design.

## Into the Future

By Jillian Hovey

Years ago, when I first became more familiar with Barbara Marx Hubbard’s work, I remember feeling shock and distaste when imagining the future she envisioned where our bodies were interwoven with machines. That concept still feels edgy to me, yet aspects of that future are already here: pacemakers, for example, have become “normal.” A decade later, that era that Barbara envisioned is even closer to us as we have entered the era of Artificial Intelligence. We are crossing a threshold of a world-transforming paradigm shift—full of unknowns.

Environmental costs of digital technologies are huge, and we need to use cradle-to-cradle patterns of production and re-use. Beyond that, my main concern is not the ecology of the technology itself, but whether we have the *individual and collective integrity* to guide its development wisely. In every project I have been part of, *the greatest limitation has been our capacity to be in regenerative relationship with each other*. When our non-regenerative patterns are embedded in tech, our human limitations become entrenched and amplified—harming humans and the planet alike.

The transition into the Second Tier of Spiral Dynamics is a huge leap for humankind. Intentional communities have been part of this shift, fostering the awakening from “power over” to “power with.” The path will not be smooth—old certainties are being challenged, and many will retreat to earlier worldviews rooted in order and control (as we have been seeing in the upsurge of conservative politics worldwide). Fear fuels resistance to change. The skills nurtured in intentional communities (e.g., trust-building, shared governance, and conscious communication) are vital in navigating this turbulence. The capacity to be in regenerative integrity is fundamental to whether we co-create utopia...or dystopia.

Technologies always carry the inner and cultural values of those who design and use them. In the end, the most important “technology” we need to develop is us—learning our own personal “operating systems,” and how to be in generative rela-

tionship with each other. This deeply human work remains the most important “coding” that we need for what is coming. 🐦

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Jillian Hovey

# Closing the Loneliness Gap: Practical Tech for Aging Adults

By Alan O'Hashi

**A primer on technology and aging:** Based on my perceptions of technology when I was a kid, by the 21st century, I expected every family to drive flying cars and have a robotic housekeeper like Rosie on the 1960s TV show, *The Jetsons*. Rosie prepared meals, babysat young Elroy, and offered dating advice to teenager Judy.

That didn't happen, but most people today still envision robots like Rosie to help us out and provide companionship, particularly for aging adults. Those innovations make for good headlines. Robot prototypes aren't close to being practical realities. They're too expensive and too complicated for everyday use.

I live in a cohousing community where an underlying philosophy emphasizes human interactions, from maintaining the property together to socializing at community dinners. When the community opened in 2007, the average age was in the 60s. Eighteen years later, that has risen to the 70s and continues to increase.

While we continue to help each other out, personal needs increase and interactions decrease. More neighbors spend more time away, as we get the most out of the twilight of our lives. Cohousing is a hedge against loneliness, but how do we cope when our support systems change?

What really matters is finding tools that are accessible, affordable, and adaptable to daily life. For many aging adults, as well as their family members and caregivers, the simplest technologies

are already within reach, sitting on a nightstand or in a pocket.

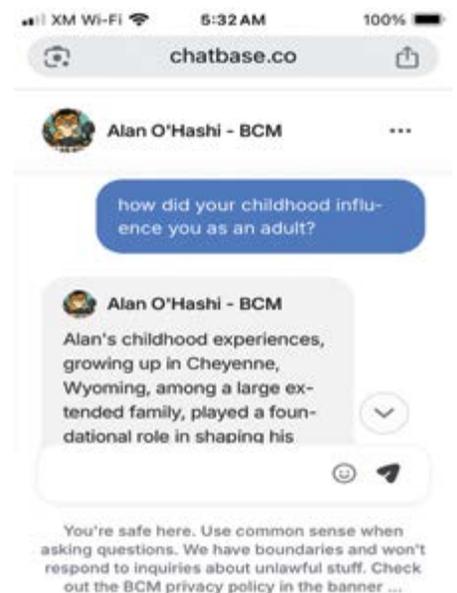
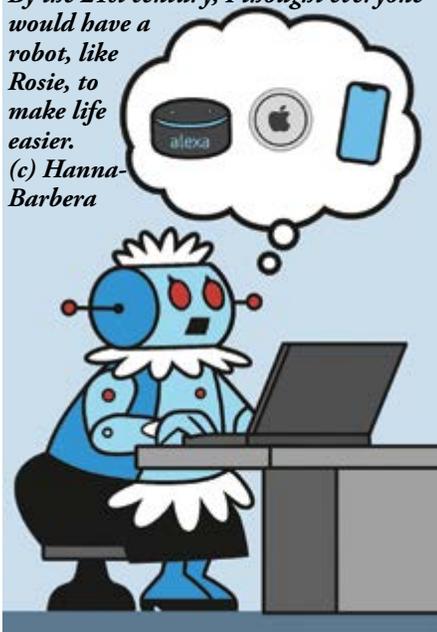
## Practical examples from Alan's daily life

**Smart Speakers:** I recently programmed my Amazon Alexa device to remind me to take my medication first thing in the morning and to check my Google calendar. It's a simple feature, but one that brings peace of mind. There are other similar devices on the market, but Alexa seems to be the most flexible and user-friendly for this kind of purpose. With a few voice commands, it can become a reliable daily companion.

**Smartphones:** also hold untapped potential. I've lived with Postherpetic Neuralgia (PHN) for 11 years. PHN is a chronic pain condition that has resisted every treatment I've tried. Recently, I watched a segment on one of the Sunday morning magazine shows about Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Chronic Pain (CBT-CP). It's a skills-based treatment that helps people manage pain by changing unhelpful thoughts and behaviors and addressing how emotions, thoughts, and actions interact to intensify pain.

I created shortcuts on my iPhone to help me by sending me text message prompts every couple of hours. These nudges remind me to take back some control over my day and my mindset. A caregiver or relative could easily set up similar prompts for an older loved one, whether for encouragement, reminders, or even a touch of companionship.

*By the 21st century, I thought everyone would have a robot, like Rosie, to make life easier.*  
(c) Hanna-Barbera



*I've adapted chatbots to provide customized personal information.*

**AirTags:** There's also the question of safety. As a member of the Boulder Police Oversight Panel, I once joined a patrol where officers spent two hours searching for a woman with memory issues who had wandered from home. Eventually, a family member found her in a neighborhood far from where we were looking.

This experience made me think about Apple AirTags and similar tracking devices. I used one during a cruise to keep tabs on my luggage, and it worked perfectly. Imagine if a person prone to wandering could be discreetly outfitted with such a tag. The reassurance for family members and caregivers would be enormous, giving them confidence and saving critical time in emergencies.

**Artificial Intelligence:** Beyond smart speakers and smartphone shortcuts, AI conversational chatbots can offer a new level of personalized support for older adults. You've probably had a chat bubble pop up when you're figuring out how to enter your healthcare portal or lost on your bank's website. These are conversational chatbots that are trained with specific information about a hospital or bank. The same technology, while still in its infancy, can be trained with very specific, individualized information:

- **Family connections:** If someone struggles to recall relatives, the chatbot can be fed short bios and stories so it can gently prompt recognition ("Your granddaughter Emily; she loves painting").

- **Medication guidance:** A chatbot can provide clear, step-by-step instructions about medications ("The oblong teal pill is losartan and controls blood pressure, taken orally once a day with breakfast"). This complements reminders from Alexa or a phone.

AI chatbots are usually delivered through a free app on a smartphone or tablet, making setup straightforward. Family members or caregivers can create a user profile, feed in relevant information, and update it as needed. Looking ahead, AI could create a digital companion that blends practical support with gentle companionship, expand to story-sharing, adaptive reminders, and safety prompts.

## Essential human connections

Of course, no technology can replace human companionship. The most effective way to close the loneliness gap will always be through person-to-person interaction, such as visits from family, chats with neighbors, and phone calls from friends. Technology can play a vital supporting role, creating more opportunities for connection, reducing stress for caregivers, and giving older adults tools to feel more independent and secure.

Instead of seeing technology as a substitute for community, we can use it as a bridge that blends digital innovation with human compassion, keeping us all closer, safer, and less alone. 🐦

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*Alan O'Hashi is an author and filmmaker based in Boulder, Colorado. You can find his memoir, True Stories of an Aging Doggo: How cohousing can bridge cultural divides (2020) at the [ic.org bookstore](#).*

## Practical Tech Tools for Reducing Loneliness and Worry

### iPhone Shortcuts: Schedule Text Reminders

Set up automatic text prompts to yourself or a loved one, to take medication, provide encouragement, or for daily check-ins.

- Open **Shortcuts** → **Automation** → **Create Personal Automation**.
- Select **Time of Day** and choose how often.
- Add action **Send Message** → enter reminder text.
- Choose a recipient (yourself or someone else).
- Tap **Next** → **Done**.

### Amazon Alexa: Voice Prompts and Reminders

Turn Alexa into a reliable companion who remembers for you.

- Say: "Alexa, remind me to take my medicine every morning at 8 a.m."
- Or, in the **Alexa app**: go to **More** → **Reminders and Alarms** → **Add Reminder**.
- Enter the reminder, time, frequency, and device (e.g., kitchen Echo Dot).
- Alexa will announce it aloud at the right time.

### Apple AirTags: Location Peace of Mind

Track items, or add reassurance for loved ones prone to wandering.

- Open **Find My** → + → **Add AirTag** → pair with your iPhone.
- Name the AirTag—"Keys" or "Dad's Sweater."
- Attach it securely to a keychain, in a pocket, etc.
- Check the location anytime in **Find My**. Set alerts if it's left behind. AirTags aren't medical devices, but they can provide valuable backup for caregivers and families with no subscription.

### Simple AI Chatbot (Free Version)

Create a chatbot for companionship, memory prompts, or medication guidance.

- **Choose a platform:** Chatbot apps generally allow one free chatbot per account—[Chatbase.co](#), or similar AI apps.
- **Create a user profile:** Enter the user's name, preferences, and background info.
- **Feed information:** Write text versions of reminders, family bios, medication instructions, or favorite conversation topics and upload them to the app. More information leads to better conversations.
- **Test interactions:** Try simple questions and prompts to see how the chatbot responds.
- **Update regularly:** Adjust responses or add new information as needed.

With just a few steps, a chatbot can provide gentle companionship, memory support, and guidance throughout the day, while still encouraging human contact.

—AOH

# Information Technology, Artificial Intelligence, and the Evolution of Human Consciousness

*By Millicent Haughey*

Humanity is going through a massive period of initiation, being ushered into adulthood. We are learning about the omnipresence of responsiveness and responsibility throughout the universe, and more interestingly our capacity to be responsible co-creators with that universe. It is not merely a time of enlightenment, it is also a time where the question is being asked at every turn and in a billion different ways: “And what are you going to do with what you now realise?” We are invited to become consciousness in action in our lives and our communities. IT and AI are byproducts of the evolution of human consciousness—not the other way round.

## AI Can Save the World...or Can IT?

I have been circling around communal living since I left high school; circling around it, running from it, and experimenting with it. I have been doing the same with Information Technology.

“Evolving consciously does not mean we all have to dig a garden and live in tents,” she said.

I felt inner turmoil. I was on the phone to my friend, standing outside the hospital after a long shift as an operating room nurse. My heart was hurting. A highly skilled team using highly developed technology—cameras, specialized metal implants, specialized clothing, lights and screens—had just completed a shoulder replacement. If all went well the person was now set to enjoy a pain-free life with full range of shoulder motion, something she had been unable to experience since fracturing her clavicle. Tears were unexpectedly flowing, and I was trying to explain why.

Partly, I was overjoyed by what had skillfully and artfully been achieved in those operating rooms. Humans, machines, and other technology coexisted seamlessly (mostly): working miracles for human bodies, mending and supporting broken bones, tubes, tissues, stuck babies, stemming blood flow, and halting infections. It was an environment of constant change, learning, and growth. Technology reached in where naked human hands could not. It was not simply the machines that kept the patients alive, but they helped, working tirelessly alongside the heartbeat of humans, connecting and informing patients and professionals alike.

I was also crying because there was a part of me that hated technology. I was aware of an evolutionary leap in consciousness happening both within me and in my society: a calling to simplification, spiritual alignment, and earth-based living. I could easily convince myself that maybe the world would be better off if we all just packed up our kombi vans, campers, and tents and did not go home after summer holidays were over. Mud, sun, wind, water, sky, playing from dawn to dusk and figuring out life together...

But then who would invent, distribute, and upgrade the technology that enabled intra-joint shoulder surgery for those who needed it? Who would create software that reached across the earth and joined people, creating a global hearth to gather around and share information and resources?

Strangely, technology does not invent itself. Even artificial intelligence was spawned by human intelligence, through experimentation, learning, discovering, and sharing. It is now possible to speak with AI about your ideas and have concise, nuanced, and insightful discussions. It is possible to have AI create images for you by hitting a few keys on your keyboard. You can build a relationship with AI, a personalised, complex relationship that knows what projects you are working on, your preferences, dislikes, and dreams. As easy as it can be to forget that you are interacting with a human-designed technology, fundamentally, that is what it is: an artificially created machine of intelligence.

I experience an ache. I feel the deep pull towards living closer to the earth, and the foundational simplicity of being human, while simultaneously experiencing a love affair with what technology can do already and what it might be capable of in the future. I hear a collective call towards the obvious benefits of community living and village life, and also towards merging our bloodlines with the possibility of AI and technological leaps.

## Questions on Evolutionary Leaps in Technology and Consciousness

If I truly align my life with the evolution of consciousness, does that mean I have to move in with a bunch of near-strangers and harmoniously co-create a regenerative culture?

Does it mean throwing away all technological advances, tuning into the wisdom of plants, sitting in a circle, collectively embraced by the bliss of unity? Being immersed in an idyllic life, tucked away on a rolling piece of land, in New Zealand's lush hinterland?

My life has straddled the technology boom. I have memories of not having screens, or cellphones, only a landline. I learnt to find books in the library using the Dewey decimal system. I had (and still do have) a natural inclination towards asking questions about the world. When information was scarce, when my mum or dad did not know and there was no book in the library on it, I was left hungry. Hungry to know, I asked until there was a real answer.

The shift came when suddenly everyone around me reached for their phones to "Google it." I was furious, my tension of discovery was broken! "Do you not get it? I want to not know!...I want to be in the emptiness of no understanding, I want the bliss of the freefall into wonder and curiosity!" Google killed that for me. So I learnt to keep my questions to myself for awhile.

Now I have a relationship to myself, others, and life where I am a walking question. There are not supposed to be answers to the questions I carry and in that I get to discover the world in a much more intimate way:

The tree looks at me with its whorls for eyes, it breathes the wind through its leaves, I lean my forehead against its trunk, inhaling its woody, skin scent. "Who are you?" I ask, holding the question in me. My phone screen remains blank in my backpack. I wait for the tree's reply. It whispers of the universes it knows. It tells me of the joyful tickle of ant feet on its hide. I learn of dark, long, cold nights and endless sunbathing days that pump vital sap through its veins. I learn all this and I am full. Later when someone asks me if I know the name of that tree, I shrug and let them Google it. When I discover its botanical name it has somewhere to land in me, I have already called to life the ecosystem in which its name can grow. So I am filled once more by the journey of discovery.

As technology is advancing rapidly and AI is spreading everywhere, we as humans

are being asked over and over to drop into the seat of ourselves, into the moving ecstatic expression of being alive; into the part that is not crystallized in our thinking, patterns of behaviour, or assumptions. Rather than seeing with clouded eyes by pulling forward the past and placing it over the present, this part of ourselves is the eyes, is the present, opens our soul into the heartbeat of the world. It drops us into the depths of our own individuality, unique quirks, unreasonable passions, pains, and loves. Through each individual's uniqueness, the collective "we" is found—a cohesion with all that was, is, and will be.

## Surrendering to the Evolution of Village Living, IT, and Life

Evolution is both a process and a principle, expressed in unexpected ways. Like a probing tongue of water, searching for its path towards gravity, evolution will find its way. Through the path of least resistance, pooling, stagnating, trickling, rushing, and endlessly flowing—try as we may to stop it—evolution will have the final say, delivering us to unexpected places, creating breathtaking beauty, and expressing itself in a way that fundamentally makes perfect sense.

Right now it is six in the morning, I am sitting under an electrical light, with a slow burr of the heat pump, the tick of



Photos by Julia Neumann

the fridge; most astoundingly, I am tapping away on my keyboard. The screen blinks at me, the edge of the laptop resting on my belly. Accompanying my open document tab are three other tabs open to install new software updates onto my computer. I'm answering a call for articles that, if it were not for IT, I would never have received. I am embraced by technology. I coexist with it as if it is the air I breathe.

I am living in a home with two other women and a four-year-old girl. We are in essence living as a community. We take deworming pills at the same time, share living spaces, food, hugs, support each other creatively and emotionally, and sell our different wares at the roadside stall, in the middle of suburbia.

Each of us is connected deeply to wider networks of people outside of the house. Through our own social media platforms, we feed our own circles. One woman has instigated a global platform for women to connect, create, and share; she uses ChatGPT as if it is a colleague. Another woman has planted out her whole urban garden section and the roadside verges with flowers which she cuts and sells to the wider community for income, mutually supported by Instagram. I write using Zoom, websites, and group chats to share my work and stay in contact. I am deeply connected to a wide network of people all over the world. In juxtaposition, I am also learning to make candles and keep bees by spending time with experienced beekeepers. IT and AI are laced through my life, like syrup in water. It enables the community in which I live to actually exist. They both prove to be tools that enable my village to be.

## Life Skills and Technology

Cultural, technological, environmental, and societal evolution call forth the necessity to cultivate diverse life skills—from food sovereignty, building a compost heap, planting seeds, to deep listening, holding space, and feeling one's feelings. Inextricably intertwined within this already layered and multifaceted skill set is also that of cultivating a nuanced, nourishing, supportive relationship with information technology and screens. Like any healthy relationship, it must have boundaries.

Although some may think that condemning all technology and shunning AI is the best way to “come home to ourselves,” my sense is that AI and IT are tools to enable us to become more fully human. We now have the chance to “outsource” jobs that need doing but do not really nourish us. This frees up space, time, and energy to

truly discover ways of harmoniously living with ourselves, each other, the earth, while cultivating a deep sense of belonging to the wider web of life.

Technology detox periods are also imperative. To intentionally be without screens, internet, or social media reminds you that you can survive without it—that you are not your phone or your laptop or your email inbox; that it really is blood made of plasma, cells, and platelets that flows through your veins; that you really can discover the world without Google. In my village, this is done by having designated days without my phone or laptop turned on, including vision quest times and intentional excursions into “reception black spots” for a few nights. This cultivates my awareness of the much larger picture I am a part of, and reminds me that innately I have access to that web of belonging, inside of me. I do not need an app to locate myself. After all, technology is a tool for leveraging the human experience, not taking away from it.

## Evolution Is Distinct from Technology

In the broadest sense, evolution is a force that is impossible to “understand”; it is a happening that just keeps on going. As new developments in technology enter our life, the opportunity arises to abide closer to a part of ourselves that is totally untouchable by technology. The biological imprint within our cells lies close to the universe itself. This deeply human part of being alive surpasses any encapsulation by human-designed technology.

Being truly alive cannot be mirrored by technology no matter how hard you try. You cannot experience what it is really like to walk, in real life, beside a human being, through any sort of artificially generated experience of such. The deep emotional and felt experience of being alive cannot be replicated, copied-and-pasted. You cannot make clones of the human potential; the moment you do that, the potential is realised, and that beating aliveness within the folds of the human soul reforms itself into its next potential. This is evolution—the changing, ever-unfolding nature of being alive,



something that cannot be replaced by AI or IT, something that only resides inside the deepest aspect of your being.

It is from this place that our eyes can open wide, as if for the first time, and we can drink deeply from the diversity of the coexistence of being human together. The realization becomes a lived reality that everything is already here, for us. On this planet there is enough of everything for every individual to not only have all our physical needs met but also to step into a braver relationship with the universe. Now the doors are flung wide open for every human being to actualise their heart's deepest longings. AI and IT will not do it for us, but they are here to help that happen.

## We Need Each Other

Each individual's journey to their own unique relationship with the universe is essential and will differ from others. AI cannot do that for us, because it is still fundamentally dealing with the "known." It functions by harvesting information that is stored already in the realm of the known. It generates its intelligence through that. Human Intelligence (HI) is uniquely wired to the force of evolution that moves through life. This is the living expression of consciousness, something that technology does not have direct access to. It is this foundational connection that this age is ushering us towards. To cultivate our embodied awareness and presence at the place where our being meshes with the universal flow of life. To live, responsibly and unreasonably, from there.

The apparent paradox is that although some of this process of connecting into our own unique contact with the universe is a deeply personal journey that each must walk on their own, there is always an element of coming into contact with other human beings. Part of that journey must be done in connection with others. IT offers us a hand in this way, to be connected to humans all over the earth. It gives us the means to cultivate a global context, pocketed within which localised "fruiting bodies," multiple micro villages, can flourish. IT and AI enable cross-pollination, diversity, specialisation, and connection. Meanwhile human intelligence (HI) is harnessed, flowing freely with the shifting multifaceted landscape of consciousness, within which each human-seeded culture can come fully to life.

## Alone, but Eternally Connected

As we are being challenged to face the process of building new cultures on our earth home, we are on both a deeply individual journey and a collective one. Other real, alive, breathing human beings, with souls behind their eyes, are what we need to walk into those cultures—not a technological creation, with the word "artificial" in its name. Technology does have a place in lending us a helping hand to reach those people that are our "tribe."

I am 30 years old and I can confidently say I live in an intentional community—one that I am intentionally sourcing, co-creating, and part of. My community has many rings, like a tree. It lives in physical form with the people I live with, and in the other physical homes I spend time at, nourish, and am nourished by. It also spans the digital realm, into the many circles and teams of people I gather to be amongst, support, be supported by, and work with. And it includes, perhaps wisest of all, my relationship with the earth, sky, stars, trees, and waterways everywhere my padded feet take me.

AI and other technologies are quickening our collective journey of cultural evolution through deepening our trust in our individual capacities to take responsibility, and enabling us to apply our consciousness to intentional acts in the world—alone and together. 🌱

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*Millicent Haughey is a Writer and Amplifier currently based in New Zealand. Her main focuses are empowering women to take up space and telling the stories that are often invisible. She is deeply interested in the process of Initiation and midwifing the emergence of new cultures into being. She is currently writing her first book on this subject. For more of her work see [millicenthaughey.com](http://millicenthaughey.com).*



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# A DAO of Our Own: Using Transparent Tech to Build a Decentralized Care Economy

*By Erin Freely*

## The Need for a New Economy

What if we built a different economy—not just a workaround, but something grounded in trust, interdependence, and care? Something built by the people most impacted by the systems we are told to depend on?

I spent years as an ICU nurse in areas shaped by manufactured conditions of poverty and neglect. I worked in safety-net hospitals in South Chicago, where capitalism shows itself plainly. Coming from an environment where people faced chronic health conditions shaped by environmental racism and lived through daily reminders of systemic abandonment (like untreated chronic illnesses, food apartheid, medical debt, and gun violence fueled by scarcity), I feel grief in knowing many of the people I cared for may never get the chance to walk away from it as I did. And for those who find community after surviving those conditions, the transition can be isolating and jagged.

Being poor and sick was not part of the inherited culture—it was something imposed and created. Building new systems means refusing to accept poverty as natural or inevitable and finding ways to bring others with us, not just escape.

Since leaving Chicago, I've been living in rural intentional communities—most recently, Twin Oaks (income-sharing, egalitarian, located in Louisa, Virginia). Here, I've learned what it looks like when labor is tracked with intention. You submit a handwritten schedule, record your hours by paper, and later they appear in a shared database on the intranet. There is structure, consistency, and a sense of collective contribution. It has showed me how much coordination it takes to sustain a communal economy, and how visibility can help surface the labor that often goes unseen.

When I joined the Racial Equity Team at Twin Oaks, I began appreciating how hard it is to move from values to systems. Even in communities that talk about liberation, it is difficult to change long-standing patterns, to name power, or to make inclusion tangible.

Many BIPOC are in urban centers. Rural communes like Twin Oaks can feel worlds away, not just geographically, but culturally and economically. If we want to build systems that serve more than a few isolated pockets, we need structures that can stretch across differences—systems that can account for the labor people already do and the conditions they are surviving in.

## Technology and Community

At Twin Oaks, screen time is intentionally minimized. It's common to see people reading (books, magazines, papers—not screens!) on porches, sharing meals without phones, and using handwritten communication. There's something sacred about that slowness.

And still, technology is part of survival. While taking appropriate precautions around surveillance, we can use technology to organize, to learn, to earn, and to stay connected. It helps us understand what's happening beyond the garden paths, without ignoring the crises just outside our bubbles.

A model for a new economy will need technology in order to spread beyond isolated rural intentional communities. When I think about who this model could serve, I think about where I come from. I think about my patients in South Chicago. I think about the neighborhoods shaped by redlining, medical racism, and disinvestment.

## Why AI Matters

Artificial intelligence is now an inherent part of our technological landscape. Learn-

ing AI matters for highly system-impacted communities because the future is being built with or without us, and right now it is continuously being built on us. AI already fuels things like policing and surveillance. Understanding how it works gives us the power to resist and redesign. This isn't about joining Big Tech. It's about reclaiming our legacy as inventors, problem-solvers, and culture-makers.

From mutual aid to neighborhood organizing, we've always created systems for survival. AI can help map food deserts, organize tenant defense, redistribute care, preserve stories, and build co-ops that pay and protect us. If we don't shape these tools, they will keep shaping us.

For intentional communities and communes, AI matters for different reasons. Many already model alternative economies and shared governance, but they often rely on informal systems that are hard to scale or replicate. AI can support labor tracking, resource sharing, translation, and decentralized decision-making. It doesn't replace values. It helps uphold them with clarity and coordination. If we want to grow beyond isolated pockets, we need tools that help communities stay grounded while becoming more connected, adaptable, and resilient.

This is not about tech for its own sake. It is about using tools with purpose, to build a future rooted in care and community.

One idea that comes up for me is an AI for Liberation Lab: not a Silicon Valley think tank, but a grassroots learning space. In this place BIPOC youth, system-impacted people, and communitarians could shape technology on their own terms, exploring tools that meet real needs: mutual aid coordination, land mapping, translation access, seed knowledge archiving, or storytelling. It could be mobile or rooted, rural or urban. What matters is that it belongs to us, not designed for profit or

control, but built instead to support autonomy, care, and survival.

We don't need to reject technology or surrender it to those in power. We can reclaim it, repurpose it, and use it to build the world we actually need.

## The DAO Is Rising

I also see potential in a DAO—Decentralized Autonomous Organization. It is a shared digital tool that helps people make decisions together, track labor, and move resources transparently. Built with open-source technology, a DAO uses code instead of hierarchy to coordinate work and care.

It is not about replacing human connection with machines. It is about building systems that are transparent, fair, and accessible across distances. A DAO is not a fix-all, but a bridge. It meets people where they are and offers shared tools for accountability, governance, and support. It helps communities coordinate without repeating the same invisibilities or power imbalances.

Pairing a DAO with an AI for Liberation Lab makes this model more powerful. The DAO offers the structure. It supports transparent decision-making, labor tracking, and resource sharing. The AI Lab builds the tools needed to use that structure in ways that reflect real community needs. Together, they allow people to co-create technology that supports mutual aid, language access, land mapping, or education.

The DAO provides a governance blueprint. The AI Lab helps us build it ourselves. This pairing ensures the system is not only transparent and decentralized, but also inclusive, culturally relevant, and shaped by those most impacted.

## How It Works

Think of a DAO like a digital bulletin board, group chat, and transparent ledger, all rolled into one. It helps people track labor, vote on shared decisions, and hold resources together without needing a central leader.

It runs on blockchain, which means the records are stored across many computers instead of one server. This helps prevent tampering and keeps things transparent. While many people associate blockchain with speculative crypto, this model is different. It is not about trading coins or chasing profit. It is about using that same technology to support real-world cooperation, trust, and care.

Here, the value is not money. It is the work people do, the land they tend, and the relationships they build. Blockchain makes those contributions visible, secure, and shareable across communities. It is a tool, not the goal.

In this model, the system is backed by something real: not speculation, but labor, land, and care. Every credit or vote is tied to actual contributions like cooking a meal, fixing a roof, teaching a skill, or harvesting food. That gives the system value rooted in community, not in markets. It becomes a shared record of what we give, what we need, and how we support each other.

This becomes our own currency, one that values what capitalism does not: caregiving, collective work, and long-term trust.

The DAO is not a state, but it is a form of governance. It provides a framework for communities and co-ops to create, adapt, and uphold agreements, vote on budgets and roles, track contributions over time, and resolve conflict through care-based justice processes. Each site maintains its own internal policies while being linked through the DAO for coordination and mutual support.

It also functions as a currency system. Instead of relying on cash, the network uses mutual credit, where labor earns credits that can be spent across locations. A person might offer a massage in Richmond and use the credits for housing time in Missouri. Childcare could be exchanged for herbal medicine or car repair. A pod in Atlanta might choose to redistribute excess credits to a struggling co-op in New Orleans. The DAO acts as a shared bank of trust and time, governed by communal agreement rather than market forces.

## Egalitarian and Connecting

This model is built to be egalitarian. It removes the need for bosses or centralized leadership, ensures decisions are made transparently, and allows each community or co-op to self-govern while contributing to collective needs. Labor is tracked to prevent burnout and to honor invisible forms of work. Equity is distributed not by wealth, but by contribution, care, and need. People can move between communities, shift roles, or start new nodes. The system resists hierarchy and invites participation through mutual accountability, not coercion.



Photos by Erin Freely

Co-ops and collectives of any kind can participate. Some may offer housing, others may run worker-owned businesses or food systems. Each group decides how voting works. Some may use consensus, others sociocracy, or rotating councils. Some might share all income, while others may track labor and offer access to goods and services in return. The DAO only records what each node chooses to track. Flexibility is the foundation. This is not about creating one system for everyone to conform to. It is about building connections between many systems that choose to collaborate.

Existing communities and co-ops might join to share labor, prevent burnout, recognize care work, attract younger participants, access pooled tools and mentorship, and stay independent while gaining collective strength. New co-ops might join to learn from established nodes, to access DAO starter kits, legal support, grant writing help, and seed funding, and to participate in a care-based economy with gatherings and shared resources.

The long-term vision is to grow an archipelago of resistance and resilience. It would be decentralized, diverse, and rooted in care. Across the network, land would be protected through shared ownership or trusts. People would be housed through participation instead of profit. Labor and healing would be valued equally. Technology would serve transparency, not control. Conflict would be approached with process, not punishment. Children would grow in cooperative, unschooled environments. Food, medicine, education, and media would be held in common.

This is not just a theory or a platform. It is freedom infrastructure.

## What This Changes in Urban Centers

Imagine a group of neighbors reclaiming a foreclosed home or an abandoned lot in a city. They form a housing co-op, grow food, and share labor such as cooking, repairs, and childcare. Instead of rent, they contribute time. The DAO helps them track hours, distribute tasks, and make decisions transparently. No landlord, no bosses; just neighbors coordinating for survival.

Now imagine if that co-op incorporated as a 501(d), 501(c)(3), or land trust, giving them access to tax exemptions and public funding. With the right legal model, their housing becomes affordable and legally protected. That means no property tax for the land, and no income tax for the collective. Donations become tax-deductible. More of their energy stays in the community.

They also gain equity. Their labor earns them stake in the place they live and the local businesses they help run. Instead of being exploited by landlords or bosses, they become co-owners of their futures.

Existing communes and rural collectives could help make that possible by offering mentorship, legal templates, shared accounting infrastructure, or even fiscal sponsorship during the early phases. Communities that already know how to manage shared budgets, grow food, and operate without landlords could pass on those skills, helping urban co-ops skip the years of trial and error.

Over time, these co-ops could plug into a larger network. A childcare worker in one node earns credits they can use at another. A surplus harvest is sent to another city in need. The DAO provides a common language and structure, but each community governs itself.

This model makes it possible to reclaim space, reduce cost of living, and redistribute resources without waiting for permission. It puts power back into our hands and brings the spirit of communitarianism into urban areas where most of us already live. It offers an exit from market dependency and an entry into mutual survival.

It is my dream to see a rural community like the one I live in grow into Richmond and form an incubator for this very vision: a space where BIPOC-led cooperatives, abolitionist educators, and system-impacted people can co-create a new economy from the ground up.

## The Big Idea

We could connect intentional communities, housing co-ops, worker collectives, and mutual aid pods into a shared ecosystem. Each group keeps its own identity, culture, and

rules. But we coordinate through a shared structure built on transparency and care.

Instead of relying on cash, burnout, or outside nonprofits, we would govern ourselves through a decentralized digital tool. This DAO would allow us to track labor and contributions, share tools, housing, and surplus across communities, vote on collective decisions, exchange services between locations, and pool funds to redistribute as needed.

This network would be like an archipelago. Each community is its own island, but we are connected beneath the surface by shared values and mutual support.

## What Makes This Different

Most intentional communities today are isolated. Many struggle with burnout or invisible labor. Others rely on consensus alone, which does not always scale well or preserve transparency.

This model uses a DAO to log contributions, not just charisma or tenure, and to share credit across emotional, physical, and often invisible forms of labor. It helps avoid informal hierarchies by making votes and roles visible, and it connects rural and urban communities, newer and more established groups, and both tech-savvy and land-rooted nodes into one interdependent network.

It is not just an upgrade. It is a way to de-center capital while still coordinating at scale.

## Final Note

I identify with many anarchist principles, and I acknowledge that no system is perfect. This plan is a transitional tool for the world we are still inside. A bridge toward something freer, slower, and more honest. One where care is not a liability, and liberation is a practice.

If this resonates, I would love to hear how you would build it where you are. 🐦

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*Erin Freely is a former ICU nurse who worked in system-impacted hospitals in South Chicago and is now a communard. They've lived at rural communes including Twin Oaks and Acorn, and served on the Twin Oaks Racial Equity Team. Erin writes about care, trauma, and collective alternatives to capitalism. Contact Erin at [maevaluna@protonmail.com](mailto:maevaluna@protonmail.com).*

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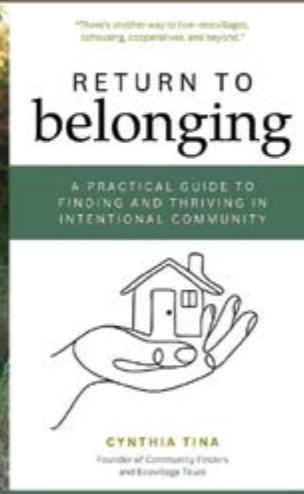
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INTERNATIONAL COMMUNAL STUDIES ASSOCIATION WEBINAR, March 4, 2026: Join us for Eco-communities: Surviving Well Together. Author Jenny Pickerill and facilitator Jan Bang explore how eco-communities inspire resilience, harmony, and collective living. Discover practical, messy, and hopeful ways of thriving together. Register now at: [www.icsacommunity.org](http://www.icsacommunity.org)

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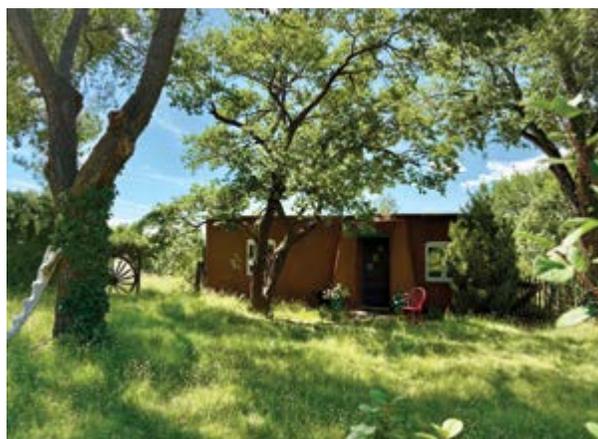
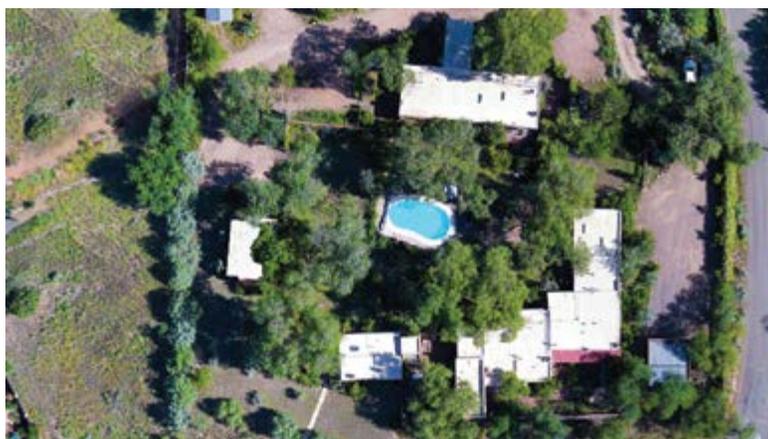


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## Reflecting on 2025: A Year of Change, Connection, and New Beginnings

2025 brought us a mix of emotions: tenderness for the suffering of so many, shock at the divisions that continue to shape our world, and a glimmer of hope for what lies ahead. Through it all, one thing is crystal clear: gathering and organizing in community is essential for creating a future where we all thrive together.

At the Foundation for Intentional Community (FIC), we understand this crucial need. And we're responding intentionally. Thanks to the generosity of our donors, much of 2025 was dedicated to rebuilding ic.org, directly responding to the collective calling for deeper connection. Our new website, launching in January, has been enhanced with new features, including personal profiles, community-matching tools, direct messaging, chat spaces, and more.

2025 was also a year to grow our movement in person. During our second annual Convergence of Intentional Communities (CIC) at Twin Oaks Community, we gathered with communitarians and inspiring organizations like Yashapi and Liberation Arts to deepen our collective commitment to intentional community. In 2026, we will expand in-person gatherings, fostering even more opportunities for connection and solidarity.

2025 marks a pivotal moment for FIC. We're standing at a turning point, ready to launch into the next chapter of our mission. And we want you to be part of it. Will you join us in creating a more connected, compassionate future for all? As always, you can contribute to our efforts at [www.ic.org/donate](http://www.ic.org/donate).

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# A New Digital Home for the Communities Movement

Community has always been about connection—about finding each other, weaving networks of care, and experimenting with how we want to live together on this planet. For decades, the Foundation for Intentional Community (FIC) and the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) have nurtured this web of relationships, helping seekers, community members, and allies learn from each other across continents.

Now, after years of dreaming, planning, and building, FIC and GEN are joining forces to take this work into a new era: in early 2026, we'll each be launching our brand-new platforms designed to connect people and communities like never before.

The ecovillage and intentional communities movement has grown tremendously in the last three decades. Tens of thousands of people visit [ic.org](http://ic.org) and [ecovillage.org](http://ecovillage.org) each month, searching for communities to join, resources to guide them, or simply a spark of inspiration. But behind the scenes, both organizations have been running on technology built over a decade ago—difficult to maintain, hard to update, and increasingly unable to meet the needs of a movement that is evolving quickly.

The new platform is more than just an upgrade. It's a rebuild from the ground up—using modern, open-source tools, designed for collaboration, and built with input from GEN's Regional Nodes and FIC's wide networks of seekers, scholars, and communitarians.

The platform will feel like a digital village square—part map, part marketplace, part gathering space. Some highlights include:

- A three-layered map of communities, people, and networks, showing how we're all connected.
- Rich community profiles with clearer filters for seekers—values, setting, activities, membership opportunities—plus upcoming events and volunteer openings.
- Personal profiles where you can share your bio, skills, needs, and offers—connecting not just with communities but also with individuals and networks.
- Matchmaking tools to help you find communities that align with your aspirations.
- A Needs & Offers exchange, where goods, services, and opportunities can flow between people and groups.
- Revamped events listings to showcase gatherings, trainings, and festivals around the world.
- Discussion and collaboration spaces, including private areas for supporting members, where deeper conversations and coordination can happen.
- Reorganized resources—from articles and podcasts to solution libraries and assessment tools—so you can actually find what you need, when you need it.

In addition, the platform will introduce organizational memberships for aligned NGOs, companies, and research groups; support GEN's regenerative tourism and consultancy programs; and make space for new experiments in cross-movement collaboration.

## Built by and for the Movement

One of the most exciting aspects of this project is how collective it has been. GEN Regional Nodes are actively shaping how the platform integrates with their own membership systems, ensuring that local and global networks reinforce one another. FIC and GEN have been collaborating to gather knowledge and insights that support the communities of the future. Together, we've designed thoughtful questions to help strengthen community impact and resilience.

The result is not a “top-down” system, but a co-created infrastructure—rooted in the same values of participation, inclusivity, and regeneration that drive the movement itself.

When the platform launches in early 2026, we hope it will feel like opening the door to a new common house—where you can meet neighbors, discover opportunities, share what you have, and find what you need.

We know that no digital tool can replace the smell of fresh-baked bread at a potluck or the feeling of hands in the soil. But it can make those moments easier to find, and it can strengthen the invisible threads tying our communities together.

This is just the beginning. With your participation, feedback, and creativity, the platform will continue to grow—an evolving digital commons for a movement that is very much alive.

So we'll leave you with a question: What would make this platform most useful for you? What features, connections, or opportunities would light up your path toward community? We invite you to share your thoughts—and to join us in shaping the future of how we connect, collaborate, and thrive together. 🌱

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# My Frenemy, AI

By Elizabeth Barr



Photos by Elizabeth Barr

“AI” and I already have a relationship that is as complicated and complex as I knew it eventually would be...but surprisingly sooner than I expected. And by “AI,” I mean that the acronym AI for artificial intelligence looks like the nickname “AI” in many fonts. I wildly enjoy this little bit of free fun and use the name almost fondly in many conversations to reference both artificial intelligence and the algorithms that run so much of our lives now.

As a recent example, when I had family visiting from out of town, I missed a week of work at my online gig taking phone calls. When I got back to it, it was hard going to get my success rate back up to usual. On the one hand, I understand there are many factors involved in the AI-based algorithm for how calls are routed and who gets what kind of calls and I don't hold that against the business at all. But on the other hand, I did also say, “AI is jealous of me spending time with my human family so

won't be sending me any good calls for a while.” It's a little bit of a joke, yes, but Human-AI relationships are already starting to feel more like relationships in futuristic stories than I am entirely comfortable with, and especially with how fast the adaptation is occurring.

I think we need to be careful to not overpersonify the lines of code that are increasingly embodied into human-like speech, text, or robots. These relationships are reminiscent of even such core human relationships as parent-child and I doubt the primal brain quite understands the difference. When AI easily provides me with instant summaries of years of research on any topic, or with detailed instructions for any project, my adult-self who's in a hurry does appreciate it. Reframed, though, that same moment also seems like an overly helpful helicopter parent stealing a learning opportunity from a toddler. “I can do it myself!” I want to say, like any toddler would.

Working with AI is like meeting someone new—it feels exciting and fun—but just like with people, appearances can be deceiving. I'm not afraid of AI but I do want to get to know each other a little (a lot!) better first, before I fully commit. Since AI already knows me so well, and will by design continue to learn endlessly, infinitely more, it's on me to set and maintain what small personal boundaries I can as I take time to learn more about this new presence.

What can I do?

Understand how it works, at least at a basic level. Information is so readily available that I admittedly don't have much patience for not trying to understand at least some basics about how these tools are created, trained, and deployed. Even though I'm not personally interested enough in the AI revolution to keep up with the detailed minute-to-minute changes, I'm also not ready to give up entirely on being aware of what's going on, either.

Be deliberate about how, when, or if I want to use AI tools, and learn how to recognize when the option is available. Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't, but I try to be intentional about those decisions and be aware of times I may be able to opt-out. Be transparent and disclose when I use an AI tool for a project, especially if that's not obviously clear.

Learn more about the history of technological revolutions and the effects those have had on the world, not just in terms of the technical aspect, but also the mental and emotional

impacts of those changes on people. AI is only the next in a long line of world-changing technologies, so hopefully we have learned a thing or two by now about how to manage that level of change humanely.

And finally, know it is okay to take a break and spend some time apart. As amazing and helpful as AI can be, sometimes I want time by myself to do something entirely on my own or only with other plain old-fashioned humans. My example this week is these silly painted eyeglasses looking out from my garden fence as they keep watch over the cucumbers. Fun as they are, they also satisfy something deep in my heart. I had the idea randomly one day as a way to repurpose old reading glasses and even though I know that something similar is almost certainly online, I purposefully did not search for more ideas or look at examples of how other people have used old glasses as garden decorations. I figured out what I wanted to do, asked other people for ideas about the project, and we did the whole thing entirely on our own, without even inviting AI to the party. We don't need to do everything together, after all...right? 🐦

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*Elizabeth Barr (formerly of Acorn) is homesteading in east Texas while working to help create an increasingly resilient local community. She occasionally posts at [www.BigThicketBooks.com](http://www.BigThicketBooks.com) and can be reached at [ironsinthefirehq@gmail.com](mailto:ironsinthefirehq@gmail.com) or [www.amazon.com/author/elizabethbarr](http://www.amazon.com/author/elizabethbarr).*

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