

TRUST • TRAUMA LITERACY • THE COURAGE OF KINDNESS

COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

Fall 2026 • Issue #212

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Trauma and HEALING

The Obstacle Is the Way
Reaching toward Wholeness
The Wounds We Bring With Us
Finding My Voice in Community
Codes of Conduct and Karma Patrol

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Trauma and Healing

- 4 **Notes from the Editor: Trauma, Healing, and Writing**
Chris Roth
- 6 **Trauma and Trust**
Emeshe Amadé
How do we give people the opportunity to be their best selves, but also prepare for the moments when they are at their worst? How do we create systems which support trustworthiness rather than assume it?
- 8 **The Weight of Invisible Regulation: Trauma and Emotional Labour in Regenerative Culture**
Laura van Wijngaarden
The very values that drew us together—openness, inclusion, anti-domination, and trust in emergence—also made it difficult to set limits, step into clear authority, and intervene early when dynamics became unhealthy.
- 11 **The Wounds We Bring With Us: Trauma Literacy, Response-Ability, and Regenerative Community Practice**
Jillian Hovey
As more people in a community develop the capacity to respond rather than letting reaction lead, activation can become something the group learns from, rather than something the group has to organize around or avoid.
- 15 **The Obstacle Is the Way: Processing Trauma**
kaseja wilder
Your pain and trauma are meant to transform you. This is done through integration. Trauma is treasure. You must go at the speed of trust: practice a little today, more tomorrow.
- 18 **Reaching toward Wholeness: Healing Trauma in Cohousing**
Joann Lutz
The antidote to the potential for traumatic experiences is strong, repeated experiences of safety. The potential for living in a community where interpersonal safety, in all its dimensions, is a priority is the best reason I can think of to live in cohousing.
- 21 **Half Baked and Rubbed Raw: Motherhood, Trauma, and Finding My Voice in Community**
Dena Smith Ellis
When a group of seekers comes together—each carrying their own history of pain and longing—those wounds do not disappear simply because people share land or ideals. Sometimes they intensify.
- 24 **The Courage of Kindness**
Dena Smith Ellis
In communities that seek to heal, kindness—not niceness—is what allows truth to surface, relationships to deepen, and real trust to grow.
- 25 **Helpful Tools and Intentions to Create Trauma-Informed Intentional Communities**
Leon Tsao
When people have rituals that create a sense of kinship and connection, it is easier to provide constructive feedback from a place of good intention and receive that feedback with openness.

27 Trauma, Codes of Conduct, and Karma Patrol
Aryana Farsai
 Traumas from the past and present are parts of all groups, and the undercurrents of tensions from the past are always present. It is how we deal with this as a community that matters.

29 A Chaplain's Tips for Dealing with Community Trauma
U.R.I.
 There is great healing power in developing and utilizing listening skills. I can also help others by not giving personal advice but pointing to those who are trained to give advice. Listening to those in trauma IS love.

30 From Personal to Collective: Trauma Treatment as Violence Prevention
Rebecca Hyman
 Braiding together the clinical and political frameworks for understanding violence allows us to find new ways to support the body's healing, whether that body is individual or collective.

33 Trauma and Community: Why Good Governance Is Not Enough
Dan Antonioli
 Nonviolent communication and consensus decision making can help, but we also need to develop more emotional literacy and awareness of people's sensitivities to transform how we relate to trauma.

34 Archetypes for Healing Trauma
Kara Huntermoon
 I heard the voices of female archetypes speaking to me, and realized that all four—Maiden, Mother, Crone, and Queen—are necessary for an integrated and mature female power.

35 The Healing Journey
Dianne G. Brause
 Pain and trauma came in many variations and was shared in many ways. Sometimes, a participant would run out into the forest and wail his/her pain away. Often, someone would cry softly as they were held and rocked by several caring assistants.

41 Homeward Bound through Smoke and Sound: Nature, Nurture, Endless Streams, Cigarettes, and Magazines
Chris Roth
 When I left my home and my family I was no more than a boy, in the company of strangers, in the quiet of a railway station, running scared. And that was before the Sledgehammer Incident.



35

47 Lessons from Wheatsville
Paul Freundlich
 Remembered or not, credit for successfully passing the torch without burning down the house belongs to all those whose choices to commit made a difference

50 REACH

60 A New Era for GEN and FIC

Digital-Only

(see gen-us.net/persephone and gen-us.net/broken):

62 The Story of Persephone
Kara Huntermoon
 Persephone married Hades, a faithful husband who loved to support his wife's projects. Unlike the other gods, he never cheated on his wife. When Persephone decided to spend half of each year with her mother and the flowers, Hades took a pass. He liked to stay underground, thank you!

66 Broken Open—and Emerging More Whole: Loss, Joy, and Reinvention through Community
Thomas Mengel
 I learned to sit with disorientation rather than flee it, and to ask not “what am I losing?” but “what am I feeling?,” “what do I make of this?,” and “what does this make possible?”

ON THE COVER



As climate change impacts western Oregon, some older Douglas fir trees have been dying and toppling due to drought and heat stress. Groups of three or four people with arms spread wide, fingers touching, were once necessary to enclose the largest old-growth fir in the neighborhood of Lost Valley Education Center. Now it's become a wildlife-friendly snag (visible in background) and future nurse log for shade-tolerant species, though its blockage of an adjacent forestry road was cut short. Photo by Chris Roth.

COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

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Notes from the Editor BY CHRIS ROTH



Chris Roth

Trauma, Healing, and Writing

In this issue, authors turn their lenses both outward and inward when approaching our theme. Some stories, such as our first one, describe traumatic events affecting an entire community; this may be the type of trauma most likely to be addressed collectively. Other articles, like the second, describe instances of personal trauma experienced while living in community; this kind can be less visible, so group awareness and response may vary widely, and the individual often needs to take initiative to find support for moving through it. Further pieces delve into the science of trauma and healing, offering insights from recent research that can enhance our own understanding and response. Yet others place the topic within larger social and political contexts. And finally, some (such as my own, near the end) drill down further into the intensely personal, including earlier experiences of trauma and inborn sensitivities that we each may bring to community, where a mixture of past and present events and influences can play out in ways that, ideally, help us all grow in understanding and connection. Many articles—indeed, most of them—bring in several of these levels of focus.

Every one of these lenses can contribute meaningfully to discussions of Trauma and Healing. None of them, taken on its own, is adequate. It was my pleasure to “mix it up” in arranging these articles to keep the focus frequently moving between different combinations of “outer” and “inner”—such that, by the end, the distinction between outer and inner may itself seem more academic than real. All of these levels are part of the same picture, and ultimately complement rather than conflict with one another. If you think that one author is “undersharing” (perhaps by emphasizing scientific research and conceptual models, rather than revealing the true extent to which this topic affects them personally) and another is “oversharing” (that might be me, despite my attempts to find cover and wider cultural relevance through multiple references to the lyrics of Paul Simon), please think again. In its effects on the reader, this COMMUNITIES issue is ultimately meant to be a chorus, not a sequence of competing or disparate solos. The authors stepped into the roles that called to them in the moment, but many of us could easily have switched parts. Like an old-fashioned long-playing record, the issue is best absorbed in its entirety, not dipped into in modern-day “random playlist/streaming” style. Of course, dipping into it at all is preferable to avoiding it altogether,

• • •

One ironic Elephant in the Room when gathering written contributions for a magazine issue on Trauma and Healing is that many of us have had some degree of trauma related to writing itself. This may originate in our schooling, where harsh feedback and poor grades led some to conclude that they were destined to failure at writing (yet this didn't mean they had any less assigned writing to do, any fewer

COMMUNITIES Editorial Policy

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

Through fact, fiction, and opinion, we offer fresh ideas about how to live and work cooperatively, how to solve problems peacefully, and how individual lives can be enhanced by living purposefully with others. We 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.

Submissions Policy

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

Advertising Policy

Please check gen-us.net/communities or email ads@gen-us.net for advertising information.

We accept paid advertising in COMMUNITIES because our mission is to provide our readers with helpful and inspiring information—and because advertising revenues help pay the bills.

We handpick our advertisers, selecting only those whose products and services we believe will be helpful to our readers. That said, we are not in a position to verify the accuracy or fairness of statements made in advertisements nor in REACH listings, and publication of ads should not be considered a GEN-US endorsement.

If you experience a problem with an advertisement or listing, we invite you to call this to our attention and we'll look into it. Our first priority in such instances is to make a good-faith attempt to resolve any differences by working directly with the advertiser/listener and complainant. If, as someone raising a concern, you are not willing to attempt this, we cannot promise that any action will be taken.

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.

chances to feel like failures themselves). When the end result is a great distaste for writing, many of the best stories never get told. Thankfully, some people overcome unwarranted, school-instilled lack of writing confidence. But I'm guessing that many potentially powerful writers, still suffering from “schooling PTSD,” don't even consider submitting anything, to avoid a replay of the grief they've already had enough of.

Trauma related to writing is not confined to those who were told they couldn't write well—it can be just as prevalent among those who were told they could. Those who take writing seriously may end up striving for impossibly high standards and develop the idea that perfection is possible (at which they, too, also always fail). Moreover even for those who have confidence about their technical skills in writing, the *content* of the writing can be a different matter. Being told that one is an effective writer, and being told that one's personal experiences and perspectives have any validity at all, are two entirely different matters. Writing can leave us feeling exposed in ways that few other forms of expression do. In the process, it can also become a powerful catalyst for healing.¹

I appreciate both the clear-eyed focus and the vulnerability that many writers brought to their contributions this round. Please consider joining the community of COMMUNITIES writers, as well as readers; find details at gen-us.net/submit. We hope you enjoy this issue! 🍷

1. As we approached publication, I encountered a fascinating article by April Dávila offering further insights into any writer's predicament: “Writing is hard because your human brain, the one that's been running and updating the biological human survival software for roughly 200,000 years, is genuinely convinced that putting words on a page might kill you.[...] Every time you sit down to write, you're doing something your brain registers as socially risky. Translating private thoughts into language means exposing yourself to judgment and for most of human history, judgment wasn't just uncomfortable, it was dangerous.[...] Getting rejected by the group meant you didn't eat. Being humiliated in front of the clan meant you might not make it through winter.” See April Dávila, “Why Writing Feels So Hard (and How to Make it Easier)”; lithub.com/why-writing-feels-so-hard-and-how-to-make-it-easier.



The advertisement features a background image of a group of people standing on a large, colorful circular mural on the ground. The mural has a sun-like design in the center. The text is overlaid on the image. At the top, it says "ecovillage tours" with a small sun icon and "JOURNEY to COMMUNITY" below it. The main title is "PACIFIC NORTHWEST ECOVILLAGE TOUR" in large, bold, white capital letters. Below the title is the date "July 28-Aug 4, 2027". At the bottom, there is a black box with white text that reads: "Journey to the forests, islands, and vibrant cities of Oregon and Washington, home to inspiring intentional communities." Below this is the website "ecovillagetours.com/PACIFIC-NORTHWEST" and a discount code "Save \$200 with Discount Code: COMMUNITIESMAGAZINE".

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Trauma and Trust

By Emeshe Amadé



in our basic goodness, which continues to cast a shadow over our sense of self. Many see this event as a collective loss of innocence and optimism, a moment when our attitude shifted from “bad things can’t happen here” to “this place is like anywhere else.”

• • •

These old wounds were reopened when, in February of 2026, my community discovered that another trusted, long-term member, who served as accountant to several of our internal organizations, embezzled a jaw-dropping sum of money over the last 10 years. Our books were in disarray, our vehicle sharing and infrastructure/maintenance co-ops were in precarious financial positions, and many roles of trust suddenly needed to be filled. Discovering we had been lied to shocked our ecosystem. Like a giant tree falling in a forest, it ripped up roots and dislodged soil—and in the clearing it left behind a terrible but familiar question: If we trusted you and you proved untrustworthy, can we trust anyone?

The wound was open; were we going to be able to tend to it this time? Were we going to heal from this betrayal of trust? Was this going to be the thing that finally broke us?

• • •

At the heart of community lies trust—that soft and precious thing. It is the well from which relationship flows. Tended with care, it nurtures the ecosystem of community like fresh water. When the well runs dry, things wither. When the well is poisoned, when trust is betrayed, it can leave a lasting wound that leeches into the heart of a place.

We have all known betrayals of trust—moments small or large when our expectations of another were not met. It is rare to meet an adult who does not know that visceral feeling, that clench of the gut, that comes with misplaced trust. For trust is inherently vulnerable. It lives in our soft, white underbelly. It is young—deeply connected to the child we once were, that tender being who needed others to care for us. Given the right circumstances, we can heal, mature, and grow in our wisdom after such a betrayal. However, more often than not, we leave the wound untended, still oozing and raw, choosing instead to surround it with armor and cloak it in shame.

• • •

Our community still suffers from years-old wounds left behind by a major traumatic event: the accusation of child sexual abuse against a once-trusted community member who is now gone. This event, which involved a dramatic arrest but ultimately no verdict or resolution, was a blade that cleanly sliced our community history into a before and an after.

It inflicted a wound that was beyond individuals’ and the collective’s capacity to cope, integrate, or process the shock and emotional distress. Many people chose to leave the community in the aftermath, while others stayed and continued with their lives, relying on time and personal journeys of healing to mend what was ruptured.

More than 50 percent of our current population arrived after the event, myself included. We have built on what those who stayed carried forth, and, although we are not the same as we were before, we are still a robust community doing our work in the world.

However, I sense that a trauma lingers—a sort of shame, or bitterness, or loss of trust

It remains an unfolding process. Distress in the body turns into trauma when it cannot find an outlet, a drainage system. Since the energy will not simply vanish if ignored, it must be moved and transformed. This has proven true in my community’s collective body as well.

The first thing we needed when the discovery was made was action, momentum, to feel that we were not helpless. In wilderness medicine they teach you to give your patient a job to do: can you hold this bandage on for me? Doing

something is empowering. It engages our agency and transfers energy away from victimhood. This situation called many of us into action. There was a niche for almost everyone who wanted to channel energy towards problem-solving, sense-making, or space-holding. At the end of our first emotional processing meeting, a powerful moment came when we were asked to make offers or requests to our community. Offers of dinners cooked, couches to vent on, free body work, and other simple but meaningful contributions poured in—the emotional energy of anger, sadness, and hurt transmuting into positive action for the benefit of the whole.

Then, of course, there was the question of justice. What will make us whole again? That's a challenging thing to explore with a group of almost 50 people. We shared an overarching value of accountability over revenge, and wanted a thorough process that matched repercussions with harm done. Still, different people were impacted differently by the event. Some community members felt they could heal their relationship to the member who stole the funds if he agreed to a repayment plan and worked to make amends with the community. Others felt too hurt and betrayed to want to continue to live closely with him. We each needed to consider what restorative justice meant in this context. Did it need to involve restoring connection to the person who caused harm?

In the words of Prentis Hemphill, "boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me at the same time." In the end we decided that trying to reintegrate and rebuild trust with a community member who had broken it so badly would cause more harm to the community and some individuals within it than the potential healing it could bring to others. Sometimes an interpersonal wound is too deep to be healed from close up. It needs space, time, and proof of change before it can be reopened and cleaned.

We, too, identified a need to change. The holes in our systems, the ease with which they could be abused, were made clear to us. I have heard it said that as trust decreases in a community, rules increase. I believe this to be true. When trust is strong,

the need to legislate, regulate, and write things down is minimal. When trust weakens, being explicit, making the rule, creating the system of oversight, becomes necessary.

This is a tough pill for some of us to swallow. We want to live in a community where people do the right thing not because they are made to but because they recognize their interdependence with the whole and intrinsically wish to serve it. The honor system is easeful; it functions on the invisible wellspring of trust rather than the blocky, black letters of rules and policy. Systems that assume untrustworthiness feel suspiciously corporate, the opposite of the society we're trying to create. However, time has shown us that people can justify massive breaches of trust to themselves, even as they simultaneously wish to care for the whole. We know that humans falter, even if they are kind to us, or helpful, or bring integrity to some realms of their lives. Living in community shows us that we must contend with our wholeness, our shadows as well as our light.

• • •

The questions that arise from situations like the ones my community has faced are not easily answered. How do we give people the opportunity to be their best selves, but also prepare for the moments when they are at their worst? How do we create systems which support trustworthiness rather than assume it? And how do we stay in relationship with one another with both openness and discernment; trusting not only what we hope is true, but what we have learned to be true?

I believe the healing of our community lies in our ability to continue to engage these questions and bring their answers into reality. When our nervous systems are reeling from betrayal, when our sense of trust and safety has been damaged, when our inner child is scared, we need an environment of improved safety to be able to rest, to ease out of fight or flight, to take a breath of relief. Without these conditions healing is impossible. Without them we continue to live in a state of fear, either suppressing and ignoring it or building defensive walls around the scared part of ourselves that is afraid to trust again. Yet, if they can be met, if we can find a path to being more boundaried and protected without falling into over-regulation or jaded suspicion, healing feels like a genuine possibility for my community. 🍁

Born and raised in a small Colorado mountain town, Emeshe Amadé moved to Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage in 2022 at age 25. She now calls this community her home and lives in a tiny house with her partner Graham. She serves on the conflict resolution committee and works for the community's nonprofit, Center for Sustainable and Cooperative Culture.



Photos by Emeshe Amadé

The Weight of Invisible Regulation: Trauma and Emotional Labour in Regenerative Culture

By Laura van Wijngaarden

Under the Covers

When I think about the theme of this issue, “Trauma and Healing,” I am taken back to the fall of 2023, five months after my second daughter was born. I remember hiding under the covers with my laptop while my baby lay nearby beside a music box. At the time, our community field often felt emotionally dysregulated, and I was trying to create safety through structure: cooking schedules, financial agreements, guidelines, and frameworks.

My body was exhausted from breastfeeding, sleep deprivation, and the emotional intensity around us. I could not yet see how deeply my nervous system had moved into survival mode through over-functioning, hyper-responsibility, emotional suppression, and constant management of the environment around me.

Writing this article has itself become part of the healing process for me. Naming what happened during the fall of 2023 asks me to speak more openly about the survival responses and relational tensions that emerged within it. I hope that sharing these experiences may help others recognize similar dynamics sooner, both in themselves and in the communities they are part of.

The Promise of Liminal Village

Liminal Village is an intentional community and regenerative living experiment in Central Italy exploring ecology, technology, and shared living. The project began primarily as a regenerative tech hub focused on systems change, collaboration, and alternative social and economic infrastructures. A core part of the experiment involved opening our home to a rotating flow of people exploring communal living, gift economy practices, regenerative projects, personal healing, and technological initiatives.

The constant flow of people brought inspiration, creativity, and meaningful connection. It also brought increasing emotional, relational, domestic, and organizational complexity. Much of the invisible labour required to hold the space together fell on me, shaped in part by deeply conditioned cultural and familial expectations around caregiving and responsibility that remain strongly embedded in Italian gender roles.

We had come to Italy after the birth of our first child in 2018. Our second daughter was born in 2023, just as Liminal Village was attracting more long-term residents and participants. That fall, several people were living with us, many carrying trauma histories. One came from a war-torn country shaped by genocide and decades of violence. Another had grown up in a neighbourhood affected by mafia violence, where bombs and explosions formed part of daily life.

I mention these histories not to locate the problem in particular individuals, but to illustrate that when trauma becomes activated in communal life, a group needs enough structure, maturity, protection, and repair capacity to metabolize what surfaces. We did not yet have that.

At the time, the emotional and relational dimensions of community life were often minimized or unconsciously avoided. Over time, I realized that no outer system can remain healthy or sustainable if the inner realities shaping it are left unaddressed. The inner lives of the people within a community inevitably shape the culture they create together.

Pseudo-Regeneration

The very values that drew us together—openness, inclusion, anti-domination, and trust in emergence—also made it difficult to set limits, step into clear authority, and intervene early when dynamics became unhealthy.

I began noticing a form of “pseudo-regeneration”: a gap between regenerative ideals and everyday behaviour. People spoke sincerely about collaboration, care, and mutual support, yet often struggled to embody those values consistently through accountability, conflict navigation, and shared responsibility.

Spiral Dynamics Green Values and Their Shadow Forms

How well-intended Spiral Dynamics Green community values can become destabilizing when not held by clear structure and boundaries

Green value	Shadow form
1 Inclusion	No clear limits
2 Harmony	Avoidance of conflict
3 Equality	Fear of roles or authority
4 Emotional openness	Emotional invasion
5 Anti-domination	Refusal of structure
6 Trust	Lack of accountability
7 Care	Over-accommodation

Open-hearted values can become shadow patterns when communities lack containment, role clarity, and accountability.

The gap between regenerative ideals and everyday behaviour seemed shaped both by nervous-system dysregulation and by privilege: an often unconscious expectation that others would absorb the emotional, practical, or relational consequences when commitments were not followed through on.

Pseudo-Harmony

One of the clearest patterns I observed within the community was a kind of “pseudo-harmony.” In a trauma-activated environment, keeping the peace can feel safer than naming what is wrong. Boundaries, authority, and direct conflict became subtly taboo in the name of inclusion, openness, and “good vibes.” Conflict did not disappear; it moved underground through tension, resentment, withdrawal, and side conversations.

Community can intensify trauma patterns by bringing nervous systems into much closer contact. Shared spaces, rhythms, money, and unresolved conflict reduce the distance people normally use to regulate themselves. Much of our communal life revolved around a very small kitchen where emotional intensity and unresolved tensions constantly collided. Without enough space or structures to process conflict, the closeness became overwhelming. Pseudo-harmony did not reduce conflict; it removed safe ways to address tension directly.

During this period, I experienced ongoing tension with another woman in the community who later recognized that she had been projecting unresolved wounds onto me. At the time, the dynamic was extremely intense. Because of childhood trauma and conditioning in my relationship with my mother, my nervous system experienced confrontation as threatening, and I struggled to address the conflict directly. Accommodation felt safer than conflict, even as the situation increasingly affected both me and my baby.

At one point, another community member commented on how much patience I seemed to have for the emotional intensity directed toward me. I remember thinking it was “not that bad.” Looking back, I can see how normalized the situation had become, and how deeply my nervous system had learned to minimize my own distress in order to avoid conflict.

My partner—cofounder of the project and father of our children—was also trying to preserve stability within the community. Because both of us were operating within ideals of openness, relational repair, and non-domination, neither of us intervened clearly enough to interrupt the escalating cycles of projection and conflict. Our shared difficulty in addressing tension directly allowed the situation to continue far too long.

Pseudo-harmony made it difficult to say: “This is too much. This person needs more support than we can offer. This dynamic is affecting the whole household. This mother and baby need protection. This experiment needs clearer boundaries.”

Green Shadow

In Spiral Dynamics language, I came to see pseudo-harmony as a shadow expression of “Green.” The values associated with Green—care, inclusion, openness, sensitivity, and anti-domination—are values I still deeply believe in. I do not want to live without them. But without enough maturity and self-awareness,

these values can become distorted: care turns into over-accommodation, inclusion into weak boundaries, and sensitivity into avoidance of necessary conflict. Power does not disappear; it becomes harder to see.

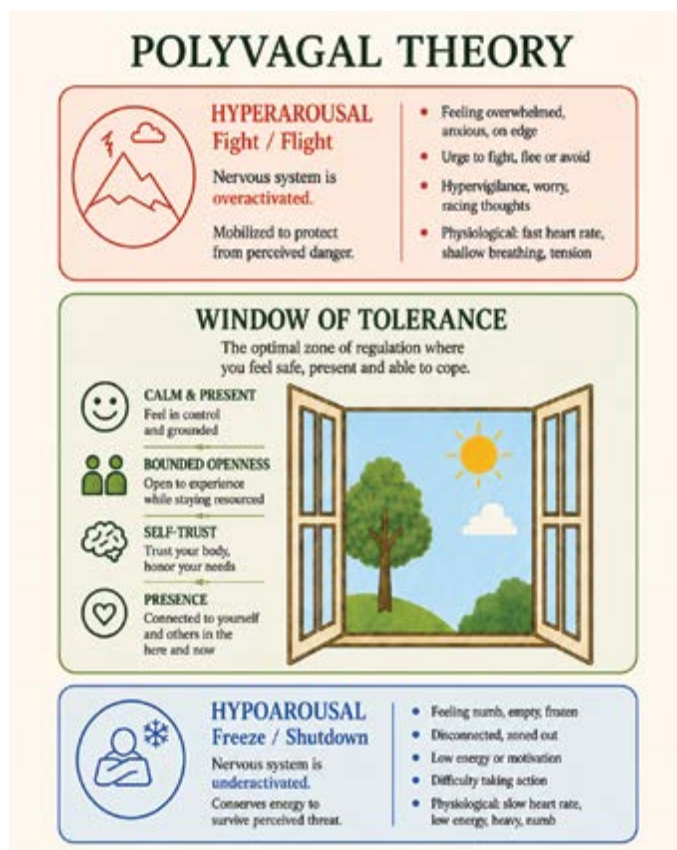
I often noticed a deep suspicion of authority, hierarchy, and structure within community experiments. That suspicion is understandable, since many people carry painful experiences with controlling families or institutions. But when structure is rejected entirely, power often moves underground through emotional dynamics, sexuality, unspoken roles, access to information, and caretaking patterns. Without enough transparency and accountability, these hidden power dynamics become difficult to interrupt.

The Nervous-System Cost for Mothers and Children

In the fall of 2023, I was breastfeeding a newborn. My body was shaped by the hormonal intensity of the postpartum period, with a nervous system biologically oriented toward responsiveness and connection. I was trying to learn the needs of a new human being whose nervous system was organizing itself through mine, while also responding to an unstable community field around us.

I had imagined early motherhood in community as a field of shared care. Instead, I spent long walks helping community members regulate while carrying my sleeping baby in a front carrier and listening to conflict, confusion, and pain. I was trying to stabilize the community while keeping my baby safe, fed, and loved, carrying responsibilities that were never fully mine to hold.

Trauma can reproduce itself in community not only through





overt conflict, but through the quiet transfer of emotional labour onto the people least able to step away. When communities lack enough structure, the burden of regulation often shifts onto the most attuned people in the room: women, mothers, founders, caregivers, and those who learned early in life to track the emotions of others in order to stay safe.

My daughter is now three years old, and while I cannot know exactly how that period shaped her, I feel it affected her. During that time, I noticed her holding tightly to milk, closeness, and soothing. I do not want to over-interpret those patterns—children naturally seek comfort in many ways—but I also cannot pretend that adult dysregulation remains contained within adults.

Babies do not live inside our philosophies. They absorb our nervous systems: our tension, presence, tone of voice and our ability to repair and reconnect. Trauma-informed communities must therefore include children, even when they are not part of formal meetings or decisions. Intentional communities create not only governance systems and ecological designs, but developmental environments.

Reclaiming Inner Priorities

After that intense period in the fall of 2023, I realized I needed to re-prioritize what was closest to me—much like in permaculture, where you tend first to the garden nearest your home. I shifted my attention toward my children, my health, and my home. Instead of continuously prioritizing visitors and community experiments, I began caring for the centre of the very ecosystem we were trying to create. This marked the beginning of healing for me. Like a damaged ecosystem, I needed less disturbance, more protection, and enough stability for regeneration to become possible.

I also began recognizing the trauma-shaped parts of myself: the “Good Girl” who feared disapproval, the part that equated disappointing others with danger, and the part that confused care with self-abandonment. As these patterns became more visible, I became more capable of regulating myself by observing my nervous system rather than automatically reacting from it. Healing began when those parts no longer ran the system from the background.

At first, my attempts to heal swung from over-openness and

over-accommodation toward the opposite extreme: closing off and limiting visitors in order to recover. This kind of pendulum movement is common after prolonged self-abandonment, as the nervous system often swings toward protection before finding balance again. I needed more quiet, distance, and stability before I could open again without immediately returning to hypervigilance and self-abandonment.

Through inner work, mentorship, rest, and time, I slowly became more able to remain within what trauma theory calls the “Window of Tolerance,” rather than swinging between hyper-arousal and shutdown. Polyvagal theory helped me understand these states as nervous-system responses: my body had been trying to protect me through mobilized anxiety, emotional over-functioning, numbness, and collapse. Mentorship became especially important because being supported and mirrored helped me rebuild a greater capacity for boundaries, presence, connection, and co-regulation.

Over time, my nervous system spent less time in survival states and more time in grounded presence, connection, and co-regulation. Healing did not remain individual; it began moving through our family system, which, for good and ill, sits at the core of Liminal Village. I noticed the effects of my healing journey on my children—especially my oldest daughter, now eight years old, whose nervous system became calmer as I became more present and less consumed by unspoken tensions.

Living Membranes

One of the realizations for me during these years at Liminal Village was that healthy communities need living membranes: clear and compassionate boundaries that regulate intensity, clarify responsibility, protect rest, and create conditions for healing. Trauma often deepens in environments marked by chronic ambiguity, overwhelm, or lack of containment. For me, living membranes include slower onboarding, clearer expectations, visible leadership, defined pathways for conflict, privacy, retreat space, and honest limits around what a community can and cannot hold.

I also came to understand that community is not only a social experiment among adults. It is an atmosphere that children live inside. Mothers, babies, and children cannot become secondary to the ideals of the experiment.

The lesson for me was not to abandon openness or care, but to recognize that healing requires structure, containment, accountability, and forms strong enough to hold vulnerability and conflict without collapsing into dysregulation. 🌸

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The Wounds We Bring With Us

Trauma Literacy, Response-Ability, and Regenerative Community Practice

By Jillian Hovey

Our understanding of trauma has been changing, and trauma literacy is part of that shift. Not so long ago, the word “trauma” was mostly used for intense experiences such as assault, sudden loss, disaster, violence, or war. Those experiences are sometimes called “Big T” traumas. Trauma literacy also recognizes “small t” traumas, which are cumulative or less visible harms woven through ordinary life. These can take the form of chronic stress, shame, neglect, emotional absence, boundary violations, or forms of cultural conditioning that teach us to disconnect from our needs, feelings, or truths.

Trauma can come from what happened. It can also form around *what did not happen*. That can include protection that did not arrive, repair that never came, dignity that was not protected, and belonging that never felt safe. Over time, what happened and what did not happen can shape how we understand life, protect ourselves, reach for connection, and move through the world. Trauma can form a kind of scar tissue, which can carry not only memories of pain, but also ways of protecting ourselves in relationship. We do not leave these histories at the door when we enter community.

The Wounds I Walk With

My family history includes intergenerational trauma involving childhood accidents and death, addiction, mental illness, repeated suicide attempts, narcissism, incest, and war. My family had enough money during most of my growing years, but very little capacity to be present and connect with my emotional and physical needs. That neglect contributed to a serious childhood accident that left me with lifelong physical challenges. My only sibling was born with mental and physical disabilities. I love her dearly, and I also recognize that the intensity of her care contributed significantly to my learning to go without much of what I needed. All of these factors have shaped how I understand myself, relate to others, and move through the world.

I started to wake up at age 16 when I recognized that some of the patterns I had inherited were not ones I wanted to keep living from. I have been on a path of learning, healing, and evolving ever since. More recently, my journey has included a multi-year trauma therapy program at Women’s College Hospital in Toronto for adults who experienced trauma in childhood. Their support has helped me meet deep-seated wounds and continue learning how the effects of trauma live in me and shape my relationships.

Community life has been part of my learning about trauma and healing since I first began living in community in 1983.

I saw early on how tensions and relational dynamics could arise between people. Over the decades since, I have had the privilege of supporting people and projects in over 40 countries across five continents. Living and working in community across diverse cultural contexts has helped me recognize how trauma-shaped patterns move through human groups. What I share here comes from that ongoing learning and practice.

Trauma Literacy and Intentional Community

Intentional communities have long been places where people are catalysts of cultural change. We experiment with how to share labour, make decisions, hold power, live with conflict, practice belonging, and care for land and one another. In many ways, intentional communities have already been practising trauma-relevant capacities, even before



The Fabric of Trauma shows how different kinds, sources, scales, and imprints of trauma become part of what we bring into community life.

we had trauma-specific language. Trauma literacy gives us a way to bring more conscious attention to that existing work. It can help communities work more skillfully with what is already happening within and between us, but trauma language should not become a way to avoid accountability, over-explain wounds, or label others. When held with care, increasing our trauma literacy can help us see the threads we carry and meet them with more discernment and responsibility. In community, these threads rarely stay private for long; they become part of the shared field.

The Ecology of Trauma and Protection

Through my own healing work, I have come to understand that the impact of trauma can extend beyond the initial wound. Dr. Gabor Maté, whose trauma work has become quite well known, helps deepen this understanding of trauma. Dr. Maté says trauma is not only the event itself, but what remains alive in us afterward. Those lasting effects can include needs that were not met, longings that did not feel safe, fears, meanings, and protective strategies. Together, they can form an inner ecology that influences how we perceive, respond, and relate.

Internal Family Systems (IFS) offers a helpful framework for understanding the relationship between wounds and their protectors. In the IFS model, human beings carry “wounded parts” that hold hurt, fear, shame, and unmet needs, and also “protective parts” that try to prevent that pain from being touched again. Protectors may act in familiar trauma responses such as fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. In daily interactions, those protective responses can take many forms, including control, criticism, withdrawal, appeasing, numbing, over-functioning, or caretaking. They are attempts to protect, even when their effects become painful.

Protectors often become part of our inner life, influencing how we perceive, relate, lead, avoid, defend, help, or stay safe. Many of us live from those protectors without realizing it. In fact, protective strategies can feel like personality, maturity, competence, discernment, independence, generosity, or simply “how I am.” They can also live in the body as tension, numbness, vigilance, impulse, collapse, or exhaustion. When something in the present touches an old wound, we may feel triggered. When that happens, protection can move at the lightning speed of the nervous system.

While protective strategies can have painful effects, they are not the enemy. IFS offers the reminder that there are “no bad parts.” Protectors often develop as intelligent ways of surviving, adapting, belonging, or preventing further harm. At the same time, strat-

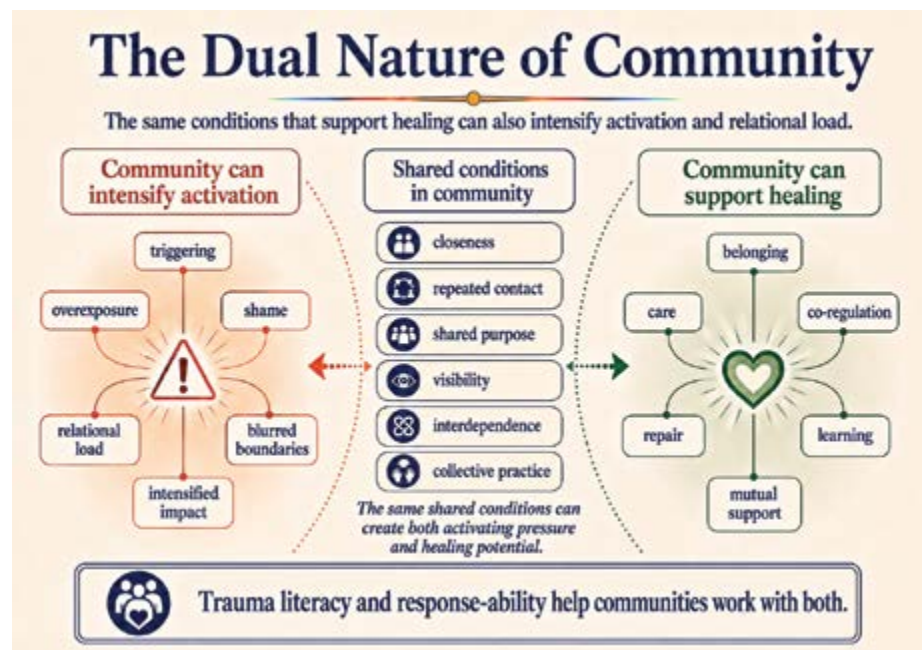
egies that once helped us try to stay safe can later make truth, feedback, intimacy, rest, or responsibility feel harder to bear. In personal growth and community practice, the invitation is not to shame these strategies, but to bring compassion and curiosity to them. We can ask what this protector is afraid of, what it is defending, and what support, safety, or choice might help it soften.

Relational Load and the Dual Nature of Community

I have often witnessed how one person’s protective strategies can affect the field of community life. Protective reactivity can teach a group which truths feel speakable, whose reactions need to be managed, and which impacts are safer to leave unspoken. When a community avoids naming and working with these protective patterns, invisible labour can accumulate and resentment can build around unmet needs. Silence can be mistaken for harmony when the people most affected have learned that speaking up costs too much. Close living makes those dynamics harder to contain as private.

The term *relational load* names the pressure that builds when life in community concentrates emotional needs, practical responsibilities, unspoken impacts, and unresolved tensions. Conventional life often separates work, friendship, family, housing, money, and governance into different spheres. In community, feedback, meals, tools, money, leadership, belonging, and daily logistics have much more overlap. People rely more directly on each other and feel the effects of others’ choices more immediately. Relational load matters because concentrated contact can intensify protective activation and make ordinary interactions more consequential.

Relational load brings activation and healing potential closer together. Belonging can touch old grief, a request for accountability may stir shame, a boundary can awaken fear of abandonment, and a leadership gap can pull people into over-functioning. Those moments can become painful when protective reactions are ignored, indulged, or left to organize the group. Contact, visibility, and interdependence can also offer more mirrors,



Community can support healing and intensify activation through the same closeness, visibility, interdependence, and daily life together.

more opportunities for repair, and more chances to practice with the patterns trauma has helped form. Community's dual nature lives in this tension: the same closeness that brings protectors forward can also create conditions for core needs to be seen, held, and met.

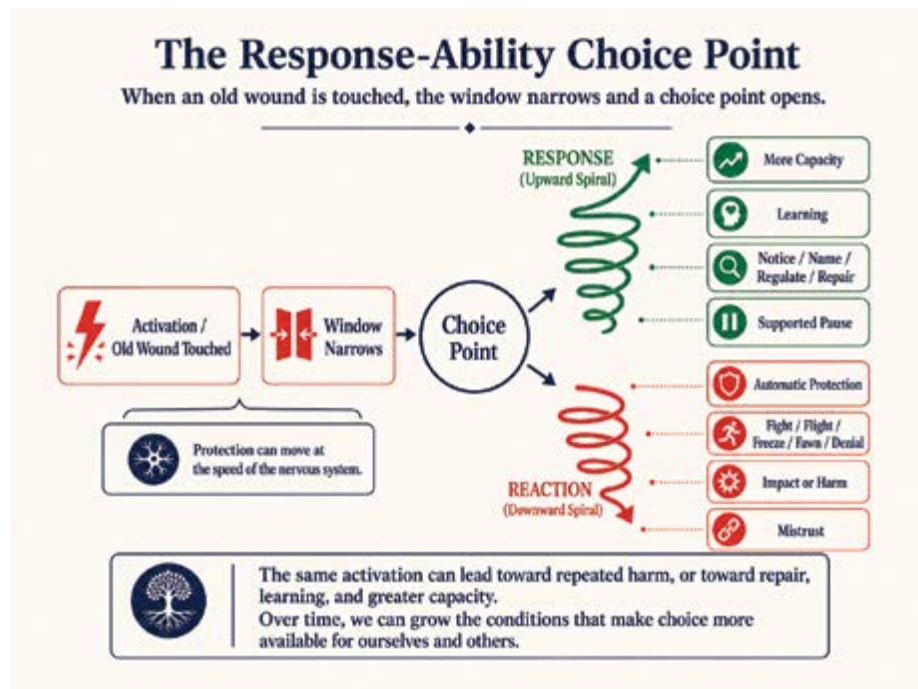
From Reaction to Response-Ability

When ordinary interactions trigger an old wound, reactions often arise before we are fully at choice. Protective reactions can take many forms. Some are loud or visible, such as defence, blame, control, or collapse. Others look quieter or more socially acceptable, such as appeasement, withdrawal, numbness, helpfulness, competence, going along, or calm. One person may argue harder, another may leave or go silent, and someone else may smooth things over before anyone has told the truth. Reaction is protection moving faster than awareness. In community, that speed matters because one person's reaction can quickly affect the shared field and leave others managing its impact.

A protector may be trying to help us, but it can still affect other people and the field around us. Responsibility lies in the work of stewarding our reactions and owning our impacts. The kind of responsibility we need is not blame, self-attack, or making the protector wrong. Good intentions do not erase impact, and impact does not mean the protector is bad. What we need is *response-ability*, the practice of growing our capacity to respond rather than react. This stewardship asks us to stay in relationship with ourselves, with others, and with the effects of what we do long enough to make more conscious choices.

The Regenerative Choice Point

The distinction between reaction and response lies at the heart of what I call the *regenerative choice point*, where two different paths become possible. At that fork in the road, one path follows the familiar grooves of automatic protective reaction, while the other opens toward awareness, responsibility, and repair. On the reactive path, defensiveness can call



The response-ability choice point shows the fork between automatic reaction and a more conscious response that can support learning, reconnection, and greater capacity.

forth more defensiveness, avoidance can become easier the next time, and unrepaired rupture can quietly drain energy and trust. Along the responsive path, each step toward awareness and responsibility can support an upward spiral of learning, trust, and greater capacity.

Growing response-ability at this choice point asks us to build more inner capacity so that we can stay present when we are triggered. When we can notice the activation without being wholly taken over by it, we have more room to choose. The practice is to notice what has been triggered and meet it with more choice. This can mean learning to become “bigger than the trigger,” own what we can own, seek support, and make amends where harm has occurred. With that added capacity, a more life-serving response becomes possible.

Cultivating the ability to respond is not the absence of reaction. Reactions will still arise. Sometimes we only recognize a reaction after it has happened. Over time, we may begin to notice the reaction while it is happening, and then sense it just before it takes over. Eventually, we may recognize the early signs before the reaction fully forms. Each moment of noticing along that spectrum opens more room to slow down, be present, connect with what is happening, and choose a different response.

As more people in a community develop the capacity to respond rather than letting reaction lead, the shared field can become more response-able. In that more stable field, activation can become something the group learns from, rather than something the group has to organize around or avoid. We can begin to meet protectors as signals and teachers, not only as problems to suppress or expressions to indulge.

A regenerative community understands that people walk with wounds, get activated, and can be reactive. Growing the capacity to notice triggering, pause, and choose a response helps us support one another when activation arises. Meetings can become safer places to tell the truth, kitchens can carry less invisible labour, leadership can become more accountable, and conflict can become less likely to mean exile. This is where inner work becomes part of the work of community.

Doing the Work, While Doing the Work

While working with a group of apprentices over a decade ago, we began using the phrase “Doing the work, while doing the work” because it named a central focus of



Jillian and Laura at Casa Selva in central Italy, where “Doing the work, while doing the work” is becoming part of our shared practice and community culture.

our practice. For me, this phrase points to a perpetual path of doing the “inner work” of personal growth while we do the “outer work” in the world. I see this pattern as an infinity loop, where the outer work can stimulate what happens inside us. Our inner life can also shape, colour, or be projected onto the outer work. The reality of inner work comes alive when it meets the tasks, decisions, tensions, and ruptures of individual and community practice. Inside these everyday moments, wounds and protectors are not separate from the work. They become part of what we are learning to notice, meet, and respond to with more skill.

This way of bringing inner and outer work together has been central in my mentorship with Laura van Wijngaarden. Laura cofounded Liminal Village with her partner, Roberto Valenti. Liminal Village is an eco-tech community hub in central Italy. I have especially appreciated the way they structure their time according to the cycles of the moon. Over the 80 lunations of Liminal Village’s existence (about seven years), Laura has seen how trauma wounds can be triggered in community life, and how protective patterns can create painful dynamics within and between people. Through our work together, she has been learning to meet her own wounds and protectors while growing her capacity to support others. Laura is the primary steward of Casa Selva, a separate emerging node in the bioregional regenerative network catalyzed by Liminal Village. At Casa Selva, Laura wants “Doing the work, while doing the work” to become a central organizing principle, with inner work recognized as a core skill for community life.

Regenerating the Whole

The language of regeneration has helped move the conversation beyond sustainability toward honouring life’s capacity for renewal. Regeneration is often associated with healing land, restoring ecosystems, and changing how we grow food, build homes, use energy, and manage our water. These visible ecological and practical expressions matter deeply, but they are not the whole picture. I advocate for *wholistic* regeneration, which I spell with a W, to emphasize the *whole* of life, including the inner and relational life of community. Incorporating this human ecology can make us more

successful at helping our outer designs come alive.

From early on in my years of involvement with group process, one pattern became clear to me. The main limiting factor in every project, organization, and community I have ever worked in is our lack of capacity to be in sustained generative relationship with each other. Energy that could serve our regenerative work often gets stuck in an ecology of reactivity. That dynamic slows us down, and can even pull us into downward spirals. There have been some improvements in these dynamics over the past decades, but these dysfunctional interpersonal patterns remain persistent. And even though there is now more permission to name the inner and relational work directly, we are still in the early days of learning how to understand, prioritize, and invest in it.

Trauma literacy helps us recognize how wounds and protections move within us. Response-ability gives us a practice for working with activation at the choice point between reaction and response. At that fork in the road, we can meet the ongoing effects of trauma with greater compassion, care, and responsibility. Especially in intentional community, these skills make us more able to support accountability, healing, and regenerative choice. For me, cultivating trauma literacy and response-ability will remain a lifelong journey of learning, growth, and evolution, as I believe it is one of the most leverageable forms of cultural-change work we can pursue. As we become more skillful, less of our energy will get caught in an ecology of reactivity, and more of our energy can feed the upward spirals that bring our dreams to life. 🐦

Jillian Hovey has been active in the field of eco communities and integral permaculture design processes for over 30 years. She is a facilitator of wholistic regenerative processes, which includes the human landscapes and peoples’ inner ecologies. Based in Canada, Jillian has ongoing international mentorship and consulting relationships with people and communities. See www.JillianHovey.com; email Jillian@Permaculture.net.

The Obstacle Is the Way: Processing Trauma

By kaseja wilder

Once we had a visitor at HeartCulture who had a mental break shortly after arriving. Let's call her Belle. She clearly had unprocessed trauma and was not consistently able to see that we were trying to help her. She earnestly told us "I am a TI" (we found out this meant she was a Targeted Individual) and that she believed she was being surveilled through her phone. A couple of days into her stay, she said another visitor was a government spy and that they were stealing from her (both of these statements were unfounded).

Belle repeatedly told us that she felt at home with us and longed for a place to belong. With tears in her eyes she told me that she had never had a sense of belonging her entire life. She also shared that when she was young she had a son who had died shortly after birth, and that she was currently estranged from her adult daughter. She was unable to show up for her work shifts or to constructively contribute to the collective. Fortunately, several of the current residents were able to stay in clear and consistent communication with each other while we navigated how to address her paranoia, and gently assist her to leave without targeting us with blame and resentment.

We did well, and after she left we had several meetings to debrief this intense and unusual situation. We ultimately were grateful for her visit because we felt she gave us a chance to put systems in place for responding to unprocessed trauma in

general. We decided that we needed to continue to prioritize our relationships with each other, and to focus attention on our spiritual resources as well.

These kinds of situations are likely to continue to occur because intentional communities are a beacon to people who want refuge, want to belong, and want to heal. We also think that as systems that support human needs continue to crumble, we will see more people wanting this kind of sanctuary. Many, if not all, of these folks will have unprocessed trauma.

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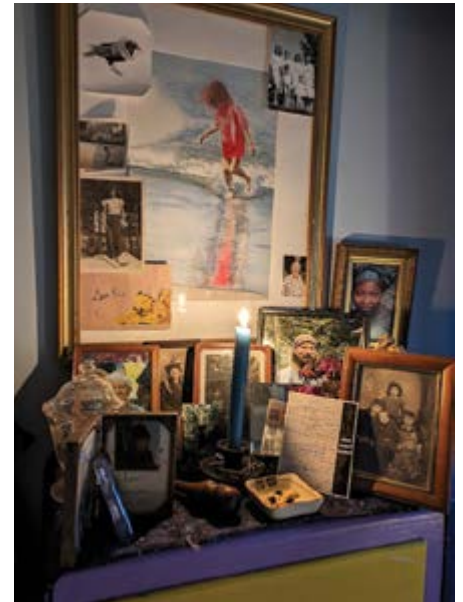
What is trauma? I define trauma as an adverse experience with an emotional load that exceeds the resources for processing the event. We all have trauma. Not only do we all have our personal traumas, our ecology is suffering, countries are suffering, colonization is hurting humanity, and each of us is carrying some kind of ancestral trauma in our psyches and our bodies.

Recognizing, addressing, and integrating trauma is profound and sacred work. Personal healing is critical: a person must be able to recognize that they have trauma and have some capacity to realize their intrinsic lovability and self-worth.

Personal healing is important, but the healing cannot completely



Photos by kaseja wilder



happen without some kind of community. Most trauma happens interpersonally, and in-depth healing must have interpersonal aspects. Human beings need to belong; we are social animals. In the communities in which I work, live, and play, addressing trauma is critical even if we aren't calling it trauma.

Our stories, while important, are not the most important point in processing trauma. While it's perfectly fine if a person feels a need to tell a story, it's just not the place to focus. To integrate trauma we only need to work with the effects of trauma, sometimes called the nervous system outputs. A synonym here could be distress patterns.

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In my practice, and in my communities, I see several types of common distress patterns that I call false refuges: "I am not lovable," "I am not worthy," "I have to do it all myself," "I don't belong," "What I need is not important," "I will always be alone," "It's my fault": I call these false refuges because there was a time that these distress patterns really were a refuge, and now that we are adults we still use them to protect ourselves—but the protection no longer holds and is ineffective. We are looking to transform these distress patterns into regulation and awareness. Functional communities are continually doing this work.

Integrating our shadow sides and our heartbreak elevates the human condition overall (personally and in our communities). We all have encountered pain, and learning how to integrate our painful experiences is the very thing that brings us wisdom, connection, and joy. In my own personal journey I have learned to welcome discomfort and pain. I'm increasing my tolerance for discomfort, which is bringing more joy, more introspection, more wisdom, more capacity for holding others, and an undeniable connection to Source.

We think of our heartbreak as an obstacle to our happiness, but I suggest that the obstacle is the way to our full potential. One example of "the obstacle is the way" could be a Tai Chi master realizing that it was the abuse in their childhood that

had them turning to martial arts that then led them to the path of becoming a master.

Consider the popularity of the show *Nanette*, which shared explicit details of abuse targeting its creator, Hannah Gadsby, for being a butch lesbian. Gadsby painted a story of Picasso who, while in his 40s, referred to his 17-year-old mistress as being in her prime. If you are not horrified by this, think about it. Gadsby stated that a 17-year-old girl is never in her prime, and said: "I am in my prime! Would you test your strength out on me?! There is no way anyone would dare, dare test their strength out on me, because you all know there is nothing stronger than a broken woman who has rebuilt herself!" Gadsby knows about integration and using trauma to become magnificent—about how to use the obstacle as the way.

Your pain and trauma are meant to transform you. This is done through integration. Trauma is treasure. You must go at the speed of trust: practice a little today, more tomorrow. Process is key, not product (not fixing it). We can be joyful and celebratory as we approach our trauma knowing that we can integrate these experiences. It's the treasure like the jewel in the garbage heap. The jewel is still under there, and we can move the garbage aside so that we can let the jewel shine. We do need to be resourced to do it! We need to be connected to other humans and we need to be connected to the earth. For myself, I also need to be connected to Source. My practices that connect me to Source and to Mother Earth are absolutely essential in integrating trauma and supporting others in coming into relationship with theirs.

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Most trauma is created when things go awry between people; trauma is healed and integrated between people as well. Mindfulness practices, retreats, and rest can help, but being relational with loving and kind people is key to being able to utilize trauma to turn it into gold. Community can be a resource for healing; it can also drain your resources.

The antidote to draining your resources has to do with

boundaries. Distinguishing between boundaries and requests is a critical skill. A request puts the locus of control on the other person; a boundary keeps the control centered on you. A request might be: Please don't call me names. A boundary might be: If you call me names, I will hang up the phone.

At HeartCulture we stay away from diagnosing people for the most part, although there have been times when we have discussed clinical assessment: when people have said they have really high ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) scores, or they come in clearly traumatized by recent violent relationships or recent addiction (we don't accept community members with active addiction). When that happens, we try to assess what our resources are: sometimes people are a clear no and sometimes the heart connection is strong enough that we have conversations about who has capacity to offer extra support. Sometimes, as with Belle, the best we can do is to be loving and kind while we honestly assess our resources and enforce boundaries with people whom we truly cannot help.

The obstacle is the way: our hate, frustration, resentment, blame, anger, and jealousy are the very things that we need to come into relationship with in order to do the work. All of these triggers can be held interpersonally and by Source. We are not meant to try to hold these collapsed states as individuals. No, not at all. We are meant to feel these things and channel our feelings to places where they can actually be held.

When we try to hold these collapsed states without sufficient resources we collapse into our limbic system (see sidebar). Your limbic system doesn't care if you are happy; that part of your brain only cares if you survive (it is instinct to want to survive). When we are stimulated into instinct, it's a wake-up call to come into relationship with these collapsed, "difficult" parts of ourselves, so they can be held in a larger space. These parts have wisdom! We're not trying to get rid of them; that would be terrible. They have skills and strategies that we need, and they need to not be driving the bus. Leaning into our discomfort is actually the very thing that will get us to where we want to be going.

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Everything in the Universe can be held by Source. Everything. We can't actually get anywhere amazing without going through some adversity. As our communities have gotten better at talking about trauma, there's sometimes a sense that dealing with trauma is an unpleasant chore. Once we learn to embrace the activity of integrating trauma as an opportunity, or even a joy, we will continue to realize our potential as individuals, in our communities, and as a whole.

Coming into a relationship with trauma is like stepping into the river that always is there. Our trauma, individually and collectively, is always there. When we act like we don't have to be in relationship with it, or we act like it's not there, it creates a deficit and we are at a huge disadvantage. Community, nature, friendship, family, and lovers can help us feel resourced enough to come into our relationship with our trauma.

All of us are carrying some kind of pain; many of us know what it's like to be completely undone at some point in our lives.

At minimum, everyone you ever know, or ever live with, will display distress patterns at some point. Guess what? You are no exception to that: everyone is annoying or needs extra support at some point. Let's work together to see our shared humanity and lean into discomfort, awkwardness, and pain so that we can access the parts of ourselves that make life worth living.

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Let's return to Belle; we all had many feelings while we supported Belle through her unprocessed trauma. We were scared, overwhelmed, frustrated, hopeless, and each of us also took leadership to help the situation go well for everyone. In short, we dealt with our own trauma and came to understand ourselves and each other on deeper levels. As I took her to town to catch a bus to her next destination she offered gratitude for her stay, even though we asked her to leave much sooner than she expected. We were able to be honest that we didn't have the resources to support her. We were kind.

I would like to end by offering a prayer of compassion for Belle and for all of us. It is said that lovingkindness is an unlimited quality. I offer this maitri prayer as we all strive for integration and happiness in our lives: *May we all see ourselves through the eyes of love and compassion, may we all be peaceful, happy, light in our bodies and minds, may we awaken to the light of our own true natures, may we be safe and free from accidents, may we be healed and be a source of healing for all beings, may we be free from anger, affliction, fear, and worry, may we be free from suffering.* 🐦

kaseja wilder has lived in communities of all kinds since 1989, before anyone was saying "trauma" or "nervous system." kaseja loves to work and play in the intersection of psychotherapy and mindfulness. You can easily find her through a simple online search.

She notes: "I avoided making this a research article, but I must say that I ride on the shoulders of giants, and that I draw heavily on the works of Pema Chodron (my root teacher), Pat Ogon, and Dan Siegel for all my work."

A Quick Primer in Brain Science

Humans have a triune brain made up of the base of your brain (sometimes called the reptilian brain), the limbic system (sometimes called the mammalian brain), and the prefrontal cortex (sometimes called the neo-cortex). The base of your brain keeps you breathing at night or if you are in a coma. The limbic system is responsible for keeping you alive. It is quick to react into flight, fight, freeze (typified by a wide-eyed shock response), fawn (acting submissive to avoid hurt), or fall (complete dissociation). The limbic system does not care if you are happy; it only cares if you stay alive. The prefrontal cortex houses your ability to enact your morals, ethics, intuition, empathy, compassion, connection to Spirit, altruism, execute delayed gratification, and modulate fear. We will never "outgrow," "fix," or get rid of the limbic system! The trick is to come into relationship with the parts that get triggered so we can come out of survival mode and live our lives from our prefrontal cortex.

—kw

Reaching toward Wholeness: Healing Trauma in Cohousing

By Joann Lutz

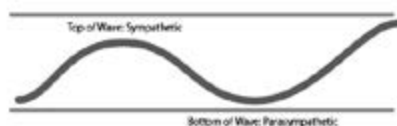
Writing about healing trauma in community leads me to the frontiers of neuroscience, which offers new directions in trauma healing. In the model I am presenting, the development of trauma is on a continuum. The difference between the development of long-term Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and a temporary experience of trauma, or even an outcome without trauma residue, rests primarily on the inner and outer resources which are available to the experiencer at the time to prevent, or heal, a blown-out nervous system. The cohousing community can become one of those resources.

In current theory, PTSD develops when a human nervous system is faced with a situation which is too threatening for it to process and assimilate. In this case, the experience will be stored, unprocessed, in split-off neural networks which are waiting to be consolidated into existing networks, and transformed. A color, a fragrance, a sound from the traumatic experience may be remembered, while the event associated with it is often unavailable, à la Alfred Hitchcock's film *Spellbound*. New experiences which include a reminder of one of these fragments may reactivate the original trauma, energizing it and creating a sensory "flashback" scene, or producing a strong visceral experience without content which may seem puzzling or threatening to the experiencer and/or the observer, but is a sign of an organism reaching for wholeness.

When I speak about the human nervous system, I'm referencing the autonomic nervous system (ANS), which maintains basic body processes without our conscious control. Its two major branches, the sympathetic and parasympathetic, have complementary roles. The sympathetic branch gives us the energy and focus to get things done. The parasympathetic branch allows us to rest, digest, and regenerate. In the healthy individual, those energies are continuously alternating, keyed to the rhythm of the breath and other body processes.

Bringing Trauma-Informed Yoga into Mental Health Clinical Practice

Natural Rhythm of Regulated Autonomic Nervous System(Window of Tolerance)



In Diagram #1, notice the smooth wave, and the horizontal lines which demark the regulated zone of the ANS. The sympathetic activation peaks at the top of the wave. The parasympathetic activation is strongest at the bottom of the wave.

At the moment of a new, shocking event, the autonomic nervous system becomes dysregulated, and the activation goes outside of the boundaries of normal functioning.(see Diagram #2). Notice the sharp spikes which go outside of the window.

In the dysregulated zones, symptoms emerge. Over-activated sympathetic energy can become anxiety, panic, mania. Parasympathetic energy can devolve into dysthymia, depression, immobility. Many symptoms which are known as psychiatric conditions are also nervous system states, and can be lessened or eliminated through the use of physiological interventions.

Polyvagal theory, developed after many years of research by neuroscientist and psychologist Dr. Stephen Porges, provides a frame of reference for a discussion of physiologically-based trauma, emphasizing the importance of safety in maintaining the healthy functioning of the ANS. This theory is the fundamental model of personal and societal healing used by a growing number of mental health, educational, coaching, and management professionals.¹

In it, Porges explains that we are not hard-wired for safety. The autonomic nervous system has three different wiring systems: 1) the parasympathetic, ventral vagal system, attached to the sense organs—the eyes, the ears, the voice, and the other major organs above the diaphragm—which can communicate safety to the experiencer's brain through the vagus nerve; 2) the sympathetic

fight-or-flight system, which comes online when a threat is present, protecting the survival of the organism by energizing it to fight the predator or to run away from it; and 3) the parasympathetic dorsal vagal shut-down system, influencing processes primarily below the diaphragm, and controlled by a different branch of the vagus nerve. It's activated when escape from threat is impossible. In this situation, the system begins to reduce the functioning of essential organs and processes, such as the digestion, and reduces the ability to take action. This state is most obvious in animal behavior, where animals being hunted can "play dead." Because trauma in this model is physiological in nature, treatment initially requires a shift in focus, from cognitive and affective, to primarily physiological.

The antidote to the potential for traumatic experiences is strong, repeated experiences of safety, supported by a culture of safety. And what does that mean? The commonly accepted meaning is of physical safety. That definition is important, but incomplete. New, expanded definitions may include emotional, moral, and ethical safety. For example, if you are in your own cohousing home, and aren't being physically attacked, but are screamed at by a menacing neighbor for no discernible reason, you will probably feel emotionally unsafe. The effect on the ANS is the same as if you were in physical danger.

And what is the impact of a culture which isn't morally or ethically sound? How can I feel safe in a community where some individuals operate with hidden agendas which further their own goals, rather than create an open process which would benefit vulnerable individuals? Or where others refuse to participate in a healing process which would bring longstanding tensions to an end? Or where some refuse to associate with community members whom they don't even know, because of a prejudice?

On a more global level, safety rests on an expectation that the people who are supposed to protect us, such as the police, firefighters, government leaders, public policy makers, etc., will do their

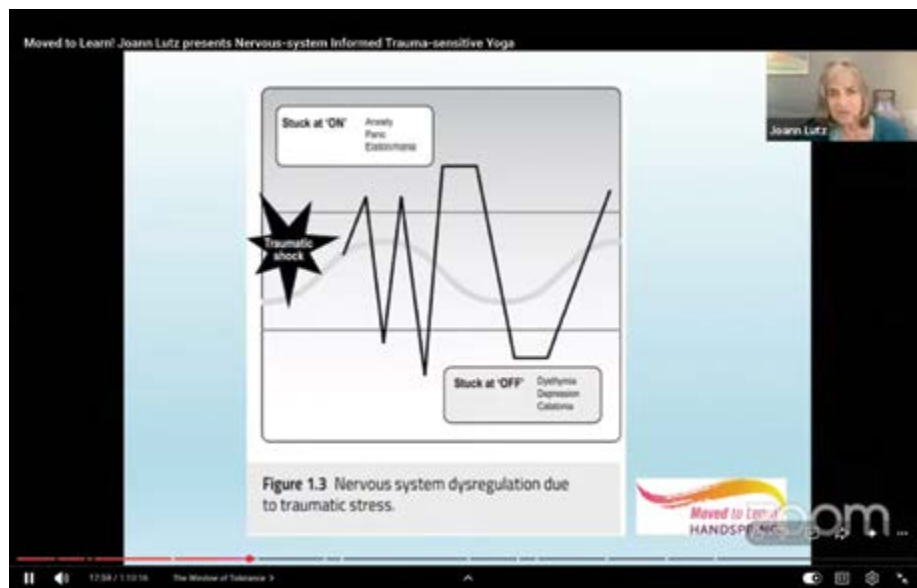


Diagram 2

jobs with integrity. What does it do to a person's sense of safety when those supposed guardians turn against the people they are charged to protect? And how can we feel morally safe when the government is murdering innocent citizens? Of course, this has been happening to people of color and other minorities in the US since its founding.

Lack of safety takes its toll on the bodies of the nation. Bodies on guard chronically over-produce destructive hormones such as cortisol, aging the body and weakening the organs. Blood pressure remains elevated long after the initial shock is over, increasing the risk of stroke and heart attack. The ability to connect with ourselves and know what we need, which is a basis for self-care, is damaged, as well as the ability to connect with others, which is a potential source of feelings of safety. The fallout of trauma goes on and on. As Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, one of the architects of the diagnosis PTSD, says, in a book of the same name, "the body keeps the score." This score may generate a death spiral.

Brain imaging of individuals under stress shows that in that state, the cognitive brain reduces its functioning, and the primitive brain, located in the brain stem, lights up. This area of the brain is responsible for the subconscious processes which protect our survival, so its patterns are very difficult to influence. Research has shown, however, that it can be most easily influenced by the presence of regulated people, as well as our own increased body awareness, and specific breathing patterns. That is why, in current, innovative models, the healing focus has shifted from cognitive interventions to finding safety in embodied experiences.

I observe an underlying premise in cohousing culture that community members are healthy, secure individuals who are able to take care of themselves, or find the resources they need in order to do so. In the neuroscience-based model I am presenting, the community members who are secure and regulated, and have inner resources to offer safety to others, are the most valuable resource a community can offer.

But how many of us are secure? For many, the past has been harsh, and the wounds can fester over a lifetime. Extensive data from the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study, the largest epidemiological study on the health of traumatized individuals over the lifespan ever done, found a consistent relationship between childhood trauma, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, and the adult onset of a range of serious illnesses, including ischemic heart disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, skeletal fractures, and liver disease. Important recent research has also proven that trauma is carried from generation to generation in the genes.²

I see my cohousing community putting the majority of its focus in three areas: political awareness and action; ecological and sustainability efforts; and the maintenance of buildings and grounds. I'm suggesting adding a fourth area: the cultivation of safety

Window of Tolerance

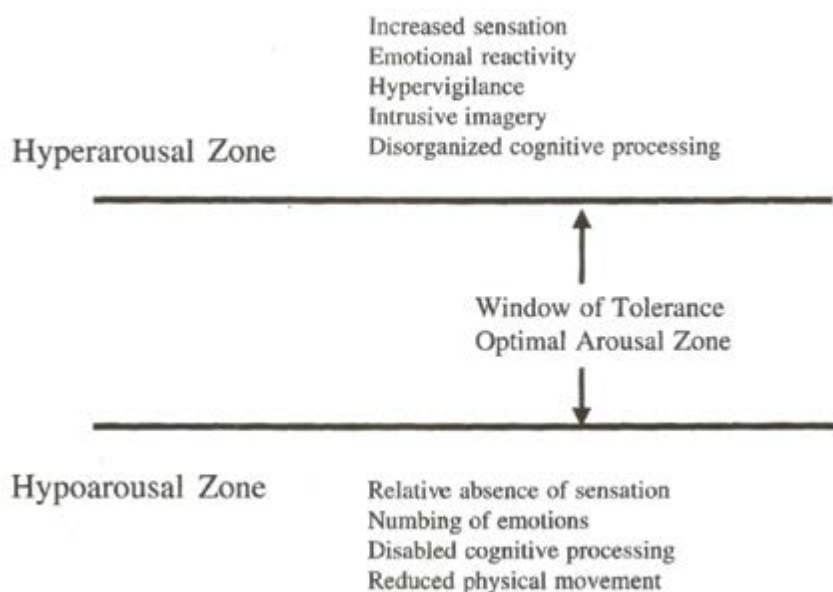


Figure 2.1. The three zones of arousal: A simple model for understanding the regulation of autonomic arousal.

for autonomic nervous system regulation. This area is the key to helping individuals with traumatized nervous systems relax and recover. It also works as a preventative measure, since a greater capacity to remain regulated in difficult situations can be nurtured in safe environments. The potential for living in a community where interpersonal safety, in all its dimensions, is a priority is the best reason I can think of to live in cohousing, and is the vision that I came into my community with. So far, I have been disappointed, and yet, with the support of other resources in my life, I've continued to do my best to build what I, and so many others, need.

So how can we further develop a culture of safety? I have a number of suggestions which all revolve around fostering embodied connection. Here are a few examples:

- Activities that build trust, such as ropes courses;
- Actual trust exercises, such as carrying community members around on people's upstretched arms, or exploring centers of gravity by leaning into a partner;
- Contact exercises, such as playing human pick-up sticks, with everyone lying down together in random patterns;
- Theater exercises, which use imagination to get out of our heads;
- Dance, music, drumming, and singing, which are all activities which regulate the autonomic nervous system;
- Relaxation exercises, such as yoga nidra (the yogic sleep);
- The practice of any of the Eastern meditative movement disciplines, which are designed to regulate the ANS;
- Circling Practice, a communication-oriented group practice, which I describe as a combination of personal sharing, conscious communication, and the cultivation of awareness. It differs from other similar processes in that the physical sensations which are experienced as a result of the impact of another's share are

emphasized as well as the thoughts and feelings, giving a holistic picture of what the speaker is experiencing in the moment. It offers opportunities for connection that are deeper than socializing, yet it isn't draining.

These activities can weave a web of connection which cuts through isolation much more thoroughly for me than talking, drinking alcohol, or taking recreational drugs, because they are inherently regulating. Many of these are resources which traditional cultures have used to create health and a feeling of unity, which inherently go together.

For those with PTSD, nervous-system regulation isn't the whole answer to the healing of trauma, but it is an essential first step toward preparing the nervous system for the processing and transformation of traumatic incidents, giving a head start to the human need to reach toward wholeness. I sincerely hope that as this information spreads throughout the world, whole societies will be able to examine their priorities and policies in light of nervous system regulation, and create a culture which soothes and heals, as we support each other. 🌱

Joann Lutz, trainer, author, psychotherapist, and yoga therapist/teacher, is the creator of Autonomic Yoga, a nervous-system informed, trauma-sensitive yogic approach to mental health care. She has been a resident of Rocky Hill Cohousing (Northampton, Massachusetts; rockyhillcohousing.org) for 21 years, and a member of the non-residential Dance New England community for more than 40. She is currently working on two books: one is on nervous-system regulation in community, and the other is an anthology of articles by different authors on this topic. Please contact her at www.joannlutz.com if you have something to contribute. You can also purchase her book, Trauma Healing in the Yoga Zone, as a paperback book or audio book, there.

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2. Mulligan, Connie J, et al. Epigenetic signatures of intergenerational exposure to violence in three generations of Syrian refugees, *Scientific Reports* volume 15, article number 5945 (February 27, 2025), [nature.com/articles/s41598-025-89818-z#auth-Connie_J_-Mulligan-Aff1-Aff2](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-89818-z#auth-Connie_J_-Mulligan-Aff1-Aff2).

Half Baked and Rubbed Raw: Motherhood, Trauma, and Finding My Voice in Community

By Dena Smith Ellis



When people imagine intentional communities, they often picture vegetable gardens, shared meals, and people living in harmony with nature. And sometimes it is like that.

But communities are made of people, and people bring their whole histories with them—hopes, wounds, ideals, and unresolved trauma.

I learned this the hard way while raising six children in two very different intentional communities in Hawaii during the early 2010s. At the time, like many others drawn to alternative living, I believed community might offer a kind of healing through connection with others. What I didn't yet understand was that when a group of seekers comes together—each carrying their own history of pain and longing—those wounds do not disappear simply because people share land or ideals.

Sometimes they intensify. And sometimes they rub us raw enough to wake us up.

The Body Keeps the Score

My twins were just two months old when our family moved to Moana Ula, a strict raw-vegan community in Hawaii. The raw foods movement was gaining momentum at the time, and the community was built around the belief that eating only uncooked plant foods would lead to optimal health and longevity.

I arrived with six children: two teenagers, two elementary-school-aged daughters, and newborn twins I was still breastfeeding. When I envisioned living in community, I wasn't looking for someone else to raise my children. I was looking for support—for the kind of village that would allow me to show up more fully as their mother; not me expecting the village to raise them.

But within months, the stress of the environment began taking a toll on my body. The idealism that brought us all

together slowly developed a deep chasm that began to swallow members one by one.

In January of 2011, everything seemed to collapse at once. First I developed shingles, an illness commonly associated with extreme stress. Within days, all four of my youngest children broke out in chickenpox at the same time. While caring for them and continuing to breastfeed the twins, I developed a severe case of mastitis. My energy plummeted, and what doctors later described as adrenal exhaustion left me barely functioning.

Looking back, it was my body screaming for relief. At the time, I didn't yet know how to listen.

A Sandwich That Broke the Spell

The moment that finally cracked the illusion of belonging arrived in an unexpected way. When my two oldest children came to visit during spring break from where they were attending high school in Connecticut, the strict dietary rules of the community quickly became an issue. Cooked food was not allowed on the land. To feed them, I drove 30 minutes into town each day so they could eat meals that included cooked ingredients.

One afternoon, we ordered sandwiches at the local health food store. They didn't have the ingredients for the tempeh reuben we had hoped for, and when the cashier apologetically handed me back the order slip—with my name written across the top—I absentmindedly tucked it into my shopping bag.

The next morning I walked into the communal kitchen. There, placed prominently on the counter for everyone to see, was the same order slip, my name still clearly visible. There was no conversation, no direct confrontation—just a silent, passive-aggressive display that felt like public shaming.

Standing there in that kitchen, something inside me snapped awake.

"F*** this," I thought.



In that moment, I knew I could no longer stay—not in that community, and not in the marriage that had brought me there.

The Sound Waiting to Come Out

Before leaving, my husband and I made one final attempt to repair our relationship. A pair of community leaders offered to facilitate a traditional Hawaiian ho'oponopono session, a process meant to restore harmony through honest dialogue and forgiveness.

During the session, I tried to explain how trapped I felt. I spoke about the pressure of living under constant scrutiny—of feeling that the community was monitoring what I ate, how I ate, and why I ate the way I did. The facilitator listened quietly. Then he asked a simple question.

"If you could put a sound to that feeling, what would it be?"

Before he had even finished the sentence, something erupted from deep inside me—a raw, primal scream that startled everyone in the room, including myself. The facilitator simply smiled and said, "Yes... I thought that was waiting to come out."

In that moment, something shifted. I realized that the anger, grief, and exhaustion I had been holding inside had never really been given space to exist—until then.

Running Away to the Circus

After leaving Moana Ula, I found myself drawn—almost instinctively—to another experiment in community life. I sometimes joke that I "ran away to the circus," but there is truth hidden in that phrase. Not long after separating from my husband and leaving the raw-vegan community behind, my children and I moved to Bellyacres, an eclectic ecovillage adjacent to the Seaview Performing Arts Center for Education (SPACE), home of the HICCUP Circus.

If Moana Ula had been shaped by the strict ideology of the raw foods movement, Bellyacres was at the other end of the spectrum: shaped by creativity, performance, and the colorful personalities of circus culture. Juggling clubs, aerial silks, music, and weekly farmers markets created a vibrant atmosphere that felt far more alive and spontaneous than the rigid dogma I had just escaped.

At first, it felt like freedom. But human dynamics have a way of following us wherever we go.



A Different Community, the Same Lessons

One afternoon, not long after moving in, I filled a plastic storage bin in my yard with water so the twins—barely two years old—could splash and play on a hot, Hawaiian afternoon. The house had only a shower and no bathtub, and the little bin served double duty as both a tiny pool and an occasional makeshift bathtub. Living off-grid with our own water catchment tank, I knew the water I used wasn't taking anything away from anyone else.

As the twins splashed happily in the bin, a neighbor drove past. Without stopping, she shouted out her car window that I shouldn't be wasting water like that. Her tone was sharp and dismissive.

The comment stung—not because of the water itself, but because of what it revealed. Most of the members of the community didn't have children. I was a renter, not a member, and the land was governed by a structure in which members held the real power. The message was subtle but clear: I was welcome, but only up to a point.

Once again, I found myself navigating the complex emotional terrain of community life while carrying the full weight of motherhood.

The Storm Beneath the Surface

Over time, the deeper dynamics of the community began to reveal themselves. Bellyacres was full of brilliant, passionate, creative people. Many had come together through juggling festivals and the circus community that had flourished in lower Puna for decades. It was a place bursting with talent and imagination.

But it was also a place where strong personalities collided. The founder of much of what existed there—Bellyacres itself, SPACE, and the HICCUP Circus—was a charismatic and driven leader who had spent years building projects and organizations that shaped the cultural life of the region. For a long time, he was the gravitational center of that world. At farmers markets, performances, and community events, he was the person everyone knew. When our relationship deepened, I stepped into that orbit as well.

What I didn't yet understand was how easily communities

can fall into patterns of power struggles, blame, and what psychologists often call the drama triangle: the shifting roles of villain, victim, and rescuer.

Looking back, I can see that many of us were carrying wounds we had never fully addressed. I was not the only one with a high ACE (“Adverse Childhood Events”) score. As we peeled back the layers of life together, we began to find commonalities in our dysfunctional families of origin and/or traumatic childhoods. Communities like ours often attract seekers—people hoping to create a better way of living. But the same longing that draws people together can also amplify unresolved trauma.

Eventually, the emotional storm that had been quietly building began to break open. And once again, I found myself standing near the center of it.

The Long Arc of Healing

Years later, after leaving Hawaii and eventually moving to the serenity of a small seaside village in England, I began studying trauma more deeply.

For the first time, many of my experiences began to make sense. I learned about nervous systems, trauma responses, and the ways unresolved wounds can shape both relationships and communities. Books like *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk helped me understand something I had already felt intuitively: when we ignore the signals of our bodies for too long, those signals eventually grow louder.

My body had been trying to tell me something for years—first through shingles, then through exhaustion, and more recently through sleep apnea. During sleep apnea episodes, the muscles of the throat collapse and obstruct the airway, interrupting breathing again and again throughout the night. When I first learned what was happening physiologically, the metaphor was impossible to ignore. My throat was literally collapsing. My voice—my breath—was being obstructed.

For years, I had navigated communities, relationships, and responsibilities that required me to silence parts of myself in order to maintain harmony. I had tried to hold everything together, smoothing over conflicts and carrying emotional

loads that were never meant for one person alone.

Sleep apnea became an unexpected wake-up call. It forced me to confront a simple but profound truth: I need to feel safe in my own home. Safe enough to breathe freely. Safe enough to speak honestly. Safe enough to live in alignment with my own values.

Finding My Voice

Today I live in an ancient seaport town where community life looks very different from the experimental ecovillages of my past. Instead of building alternative communities from scratch, I now participate in civic life in quieter ways—serving on the town council, helping steward a community garden, and supporting local wellbeing initiatives.

In many ways, the ideals that drew me to intentional communities in the first place still guide me. I still believe in cooperation, shared responsibility, and the power of people coming together to care for one another and the land. But I understand those ideals differently now.

Communities cannot heal trauma that individuals are unwilling or unable to face within themselves. Shared land, shared meals, and shared projects do not automatically resolve the deeper wounds people carry. What they can do—sometimes painfully—is reveal those wounds.

Looking back, the years I spent in intentional communities rubbed me raw in ways I did not understand at the time. Yet those same experiences ultimately helped me reclaim something essential: my voice.

And now, after all these years, I am finally learning what it means to use it. 🐦

Dena Smith Ellis is currently writing the mayhem memoirs of her messy motherhood while also launching a new UK-based community interest company—the Wisdom & Wellness Academy. After coaching, instructing, and mentoring clients and students from over 175 countries over the last 30 years in the field of health and wellness, she is now navigating life at the pace of her nervous system and using her voice to inspire and empower others. Dena can be reached at denasmithellis@gmail.com.



Photos courtesy of Dena Smith Ellis

The Courage of Kindness

By Dena Smith Ellis



Courtesy of Dena Smith Ellis

From a young age, many girls in my generation were taught a simple rhyme: “Sugar and spice, and everything nice...that’s what little girls are made of.” On the surface, it sounds sweet—harmless, even. But embedded within it is a subtle form of conditioning: be agreeable, be pleasant, don’t rock the boat. Be “nice.” For me, this programming subconsciously influenced the way I showed up in relationships: with my family, friends, and community.

In the intentional communities where I lived, people were often nice. There were smiles, polite conversations, shared meals, and an outward sense of harmony. On the surface, it looked like everything was working. But niceness, I came to realize, can sometimes be shallow. It can be a sort of social performance: maintaining appearances, avoiding discomfort, and sidestepping difficult truths.

Niceness doesn’t ask much of us. It doesn’t require us to challenge harmful behavior, to speak honestly when something feels wrong, or to risk conflict in order to protect someone’s wellbeing. In fact, niceness often depends on not doing those things.

Kindness is different. It is not always comfortable, not always polite, and rarely passive. Kindness requires presence. It asks us to notice when something is off, to care enough to respond, and to act—even when it would be easier to stay silent. Sometimes kindness means speaking a difficult truth. Sometimes it means setting a boundary. Sometimes it means stepping in when someone else is struggling, even when no one else does. Kindness requires courage.

Over time, I found it increasingly difficult to trust niceness. It felt unpredictable—like a surface that could shift at any moment. Behind polite words, there could still be judgment, resentment, or avoidance. Kindness, on the other hand, felt like

a safe haven. When someone was truly kind, there was a sense of grounding—of integrity between what they said and what they did. Even when their words were direct or challenging, there was care underneath them. Kindness created safety.

As a mother of many children, I became acutely aware of this difference. In the midst of long days, sleepless nights, and the constant demands of caregiving, the kindness of others stood out in a profound way. It wasn’t the polite smiles or casual friendliness that made the difference. It was the moments when someone genuinely saw what was needed and chose to act. Those moments felt like an oasis in a desert—not because they were grand or dramatic, but because they were real.

Looking back, I can see how deeply I had been conditioned to be nice—to smooth things over, to avoid conflict, and to maintain harmony even at my own expense. But real community requires something more. It requires people who are willing to be kind in the fullest sense of the word: honest, present, and willing to act with care—even when it’s uncomfortable. Kindness may not always look as pleasant as niceness, but it is far more trustworthy, and in the long run, far more healing.

In communities that seek to heal, kindness—not niceness—is what allows truth to surface, relationships to deepen, and real trust to grow. 🌱

Dena Smith Ellis is a coach, mentor, and community leader based in East Sussex, England. She has lived in two intentional communities in Hawaii and now serves locally as a town councillor, trustee of a wellbeing charity, and founder of a health and wellness community interest company. Her work explores the intersections of holistic health, community connections, nervous system regulation, and personal empowerment. She can be reached at denasmithellis@gmail.com.

Helpful Tools and Intentions to Create Trauma-Informed Intentional Communities

By Leon Tsao

What effective and safe tools can be used to address trauma in community? This is an important question for intentional communities to answer. Intentional communities are created to help heal the world of trauma: the collective trauma of increasing isolation and lack of sustainability. Therefore, the ability to work through trauma is an inevitable part of intentional community life. As a licensed mental health counselor, I would like to share what a trauma-informed approach can look like in a community setting, as I helped my own community develop one.

Intentional Community: A Continual Work in Progress to Be Trauma-Informed

I believe it is best to start by sharing my personal experience. My intentional community, Ganas, has done so much for me to heal from living with my own trauma from having experienced severe social anxiety by providing the richness of community life. Ganas, like many other communities, has many characteristics that create a buffer against trauma: houses connected by pathways instead of divided by fences, shared gardens, shared outdoor and indoor spaces, people you can ask for help and resources, a team of people who run the community and others who provide social and emotional support. Intentional communities are a collection of people who prioritize community over competition, in a world where the other way around is the norm; they are oases of human connection that protect against trauma.

At the same time, every community is a work in progress when it comes to addressing trauma, and Ganas is no different. I believe that intentional communities need to learn to be equipped with the proper tools to have a trauma-informed approach. A competent trauma-informed communication approach for an intentional community is one that respects the traditions of the community while integrating knowledge from psychological research into trauma safety. Ganas members at our meetings wanted to preserve the tradition of Feedback Learning (the communication system that Ganas uses)—but understand

it to be work in progress that has not sufficiently considered the trauma-lens. They were looking for ways to improve it.

When a community can see itself as a continual work in progress, when those who want changes can respect traditions, and when both community and change agents have goodwill towards each other, the pathway of growth and progress for everyone involved will follow.

Goals to Set the Stage of Trauma-Informed Work

I contributed to integrating a trauma-informed approach into Ganas' system of communication by organizing a series of meetings on the matter.

My first goal, when it comes to addressing how to change a system, is to understand the system, its values, and empathize with its underlying aims. The aim of Ganas' communication system, Feedback Learning, is to help the personal growth and mutual understanding of community members. Rather than ignore issues, it seeks for people to provide their honest inner responses and direct feedback to each other, so long as it comes with good intention. I made sure to best understand the value of it to the core.

My second goal is to help community discussions about having a more trauma-informed approach be a collaborative process where everyone has equal say. I realized this is the best way, rather than to impose my own perspective, which would only cause others to resist it. I learned that providing one-way lectures rather than open discussion leads to less learning. I need to be able to learn from the discussions as much as anyone else. I offered valuable information from the field of psychology and my work mediating couples and groups, but ultimately, it is the community's decision how to integrate this information in a meaningful way with its own tradition of communication.

Useful Trauma-Informed Tools for Community: 1. Open-Ended Questions to Foster Trauma-Informed Discussions

Now it's time to address how to use trauma-informed tools. We



Chris Roth

had open discussions in our meetings, exploring how trauma is experienced and addressed in the community. To do this, I took helpful questions from the book *The Body Keeps the Score* and rewrote them to make them relevant to community life:

- **How do I feel that community helps me heal my trauma or stress?**
- **How do I feel that I may relive my trauma or stress in community?**
- **How do I feel when I am close or intimate to the people who are present in community?**
- **How do I find it difficult to get close or intimate with the people present?**
- **Do I feel calm with the people in the room? Do I feel safe with the people in the room?**
- **Do I feel calm and safe when important people in my community listen to me?**
- **What other things make you feel calm and safe?**
- **How do I get centered in my own body?**

This led to a really fruitful and deep conversation on how our intentional community and Feedback Learning interplay with trauma. We found there are clear ways our community addresses trauma helpfully and serves as a buffer against trauma, and that there are also clear areas of improvement when it comes to addressing trauma. Exploring both sides of the matter is important to be balanced.

2. Creating Rapport, Connection, and Rituals

Through collective exploration as a community, we found that in order to create a healthy trauma-informed environment, it is valuable to first create good rapport with and sense of connection with one another before diving into difficult discussions. Lack of rapport and safety lead to environments rife with stress. If someone is stressed, even if they intended to provide constructive feedback to others from a good place, past trauma and contempt can pour out behind their words. In response, the receiver of the feedback may have their own trauma triggered and have a fight, flight, or freeze response.

I gave the example of couples who only focus on talking about logistics and problem-solving for the family without first building rapport and a sense of safety with each other. Researchers found each partner believes they are logically and calmly discussing the issues, but if you measure their physiological signs, their heartbeats are fast and blood pressures are high. When people have rituals that create a sense of kinship and connection, it is easier to provide constructive feedback from a place of good intention and receive that feedback with openness.

My community members realized that certain rituals that created an environment that fosters rapport and connection were no longer used, such as singing together and setting positive intentions before meetings. This is not at all “fluff” but essential activities for better human connection. You cannot discount the human! By becoming more aware of the human element in interaction, not just the problems that need to be solved, we create a safe, trauma-informed environment where challenging discussions can take place. My community brought back some of its rituals because of their human value.

3. Trauma Resilience Story

It is helpful to learn about community members’ past successes in dealing with trauma, either personally or by using the community as support. This is their “trauma resilience story.” To find out what this “trauma resilience story is,” it is important to ask questions. I had taken this concept of “resilience story” from Emotionally-Focused Therapy, a therapy used for relationship healing—and applied it to the context of community. Here are examples of helpful questions to ask to understand how people develop resilience to trauma in community:

- **How do you feel when you are trapped in negative spirals and feelings of insecurity in community?** Examples: I feel closed-off, scared, exhausted, unresponsive, or angry when I am faced with conflict in community.
- **What actions show how you move into this negative pattern?** Examples: I shut down and get away from others, I act out towards others.
- **What actions describe how you move out of this negative pattern?** Examples: I reach out to community members, or I find ways to ground myself. My community members reach out to me, or they help ground me.
- **How do you describe your state of being when you are able to move out of the negative pattern?** Examples: I feel happier, more peaceful, more content.
- **What can you do to maintain your sense of safety and calmness?** Examples: I can practice self-care activities. I can talk with fellow community members I trust.

This is a helpful exercise to do to understand not only past successes in addressing trauma, but also current ones too. Whenever community members are able to work through a very challenging discussion together and do it successfully, it is great to use the “resilience story” exercise as a recap for how success has been obtained. This creates a repertoire of success stories that a community can draw upon to aide in future challenges and create a community that is more and more resilient to trauma.

Conclusion

Intentional communities will become the future of how people live, as the world becomes increasingly isolated and unsustainable. To be part of the effort to heal the world of trauma, and address trauma that inevitably arises due to the fact we are all human, they need to have an effective trauma-informed approach.

I hope to have presented useful ways to approach having a discussion with your community about being trauma-informed. To start a conversation about adopting a trauma-informed approach, you need to demonstrate its principles yourself. Trauma is best addressed with non-judgment and understanding, mutual collaboration rather than lecture, and so the same needs to be done when having discussions about how to be trauma-informed. 🌱

Leon Tsao, MA, is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor. If you would like him to help support your community in developing a trauma-informed approach, please contact Leon here: leontsaocoaching@gmail.com.

Trauma, Codes of Conduct, and Karma Patrol

By Aryana Farsai



One thing my BA degree in Ecology, Culture, and Sustainable Community did NOT prepare me for was the high level of failure in collective endeavors. Yes, some are succeeding, and I applaud those exceptions. I would like to give a brief overview of some of my efforts in this area, which involved taking care of those in crisis and addressing trauma in community settings, thereby lessening its impact, or helping to avert that specific experience altogether.

I have been a part of several organizations built around a collective living process, including collectively owned businesses. I have lived in residential ecovillages, and even helped build tiny houses in one. Unfortunately, I have also seen the dissolution of several of those projects over time—often for reasons related to trauma.

We all have traumatic experiences on some level. Because those experiences already happened, all we can do is endeavor to make peace with the part of ourselves that acts out of that state,

and perhaps lessen the impact of that acting out, as a result of self-awareness and acknowledgment. Through careful observation and self-compassion, the voice of the wounded self becomes quieter. It stays cognizant of past traumatic experiences, yet not fully at the mercy of them, which can be seen in an individual's behavior.

Not everyone has moved past that “acting out” stage, or is likely to—and in some cases, this can have devastating consequences for a collective that lacks adequate boundaries. Vetting potential group members is of the utmost importance, as is having binding, documented charter agreements, including descriptions of behavior that is cause for expulsion from the collective. These documents should be created either before the group forms, or as soon as possible if the group arises spontaneously. Without them, there is no social/collective agreement about how and when someone should be removed from the community.

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Traumatic response can manifest in almost any way, including in disillusionment among older members in a struggling group. That was the case with some of the members of a collective I worked with in the past, a prominent Bay Area bread bakery well into its third decade as a consensus-based collective. Unfortunately, an original member acted in ways that did more harm than good, and the business struggled, and then failed as a result. In fact, we all worked without pay for three months at the end, trying to keep the dream alive. Many people went on to other collectives that were commercially successful businesses. Some people, like myself, explored other avenues.

I made this choice because I saw unregulated people acting out of greed, and with too much power, who destroyed the visions of that 30-year-old bakery. Their actions left all of its members out of work, some having given the larger part of their career there. I felt it was abominable behavior, and that definitely left its mark on me.

I redirected my idealism over the next few years into starting a collective cafe with one of my bakery collective peers. However my enthusiasm for that project turned into another disillusionment and fiasco. This cafe project failed in a different way, as a main investor in the cafe wanted to dominate the collective as a would-be benevolent dictator, which he most certainly was not. After resisting that aggressive takeover, the project was dissolved and we went onto other projects.

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As part of a healing and research journey, I later traveled north with a friend from the failed bakery and cafe collectives. We went up the western coast to interview 14 worker-owned collective businesses to hopefully find out their successes, failures, and current challenges. These were businesses such as co-op stores, cafes, and bakeries. On that entire magical trip, while meeting all those wonderful and existent collective communities of people, one thing struck me the most.

Among almost ALL of the interviewees, a common thread emerged in what they said: that in collectives, with and without charters or formal agreements of any kind, the people therein all had to deal with different forms of malevolent behavior and corruption of their ideals about their businesses.

Those people embraced the challenges of the group, with this specific feedback: in regards to members who are not fulfilling their role, or are impacting the community in a negative way, they told me that they wished that they had more bylaws, agreements, or restrictions of what the collective finds to be unacceptable behavior. The most challenging cases involve a social harm, invisible, until it isn't and the bonds of good communication have been broken.

They said the second most important element to the long-term viability of their group was how extensive and thorough the vetting process was, and whether it could be done with more critical observation and elimination of would-be members.

In absolutely ALL of the places and people that were interviewed, EVERY single person said the biggest challenge to the success and vitality of their group was how they dealt with conflict. Some used Robert's Rules of Order, others used consensus-minus-one or -two, and many businesses had a charter and said it was the only thing that allowed them to oust a canker sore in the community, rather than having to suffer with the disruptive and non-compliant member.

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Traumas from the past and present are parts of all groups, and the undercurrents of tensions from the past are always present. It is how we deal with this as a community that matters, in concerns of sexual misconduct, people overstepping community agreements, and removal of social blindness, permissiveness, or even toxic positivity.

Therefore, a collectively-developed document, The Code of Conduct, was written in one of my longer-term communities, which had started as a music- and dance-loving collective. Twenty-five years ago it had become an event-based institution in the local Arts and Culture scene. It evolved into a California State nonprofit, one that I served for two years as Board Secretary.

In any sizable group or network, people would have conflicts of various sorts. To address this known issue, our Code of Conduct aimed to support our people in the community, and avoid those pitfalls of unaddressed traumatic intrapersonal or mental/emotional crises.

The Code of Conduct specifically outlines behaviors that are grounds for expulsion from the event, and from the community as a whole. It also outlines the process for addressing and resolving sexual misconduct and other inappropriate behavior. In addition, it describes protocols for investigating the nature of the conflict, and if necessary, bringing in outside mediators, and in extreme situations, law enforcement as well.

As this document was finalized, our group began envisioning a supportive network of volunteers who, during our events, would move through the group, addressing any person who looked like they could use support. Attendees would also seek out these volunteers for interactions, which helped participants' overall comfort level. We toyed with the idea of starting another project in the community, and we decided that our goal was specifically harm reduction at the events we threw.

Together with a few collective members, I developed in 2014 a new project called Karma Patrol—a specifically chosen group of volunteers to deal with averting crises in the moment, and harm reduction at its most immediate. These KP volunteers are known for establishing safe zones, and are people to reach out to if in need of any support. KP became the missing link of a leadership triad: the lead site coordinator had contact with medics, but in cases of non-emergencies and mental/emotional support needed, Karma Patrol came in. Two people, in two-hour shifts held around the clock at multi-day music and art festivals, acted as liaisons to the medics and lead coordinators for the event. This type of leadership triad worked well for the community, which had enough volunteer labor to sustain the project. And that project is still going strong, supporting people at our events to this day.

Trained in Nonviolent Communication, Karma Patrol volunteers actively reach out to people in need and help them to handle larger issues of sexual misconduct, and to

get appropriate help if it takes a turn for the worse. They also provide mediation in potential domestic disputes, offering support that may lessen the impact of a traumatic experience. Therapists, medics, and others volunteered their time to be part of the Karma Patrol. Without something like this in place, it is much harder for there to be personal accountability for inappropriate behavior within the community—different people in the same situation are likely to report drastically different subjective experiences of what happened.

Over the years, the community around the Karma Patrol has become itself a strong foundation for people in the network to use collectively as a resource in trying times.

Time and time again over the last few decades, I have seen the effectiveness of collectivism and group discussion. I also have seen its breakdown and what can happen as a result of its omission. Binding agreements between all members about grounds for expulsion have proved to be essential in reducing the risk that traumas transpire unaddressed in any community.

I hope sharing these stories about my experiences may impact how others approach the topic of trauma in the community. 🌱

Aryana Farsai has been a long-time resident of the Bay Area, California, and currently resides in Oakland. She is an active artist in several local collectives and communities. When not making mosaics, she writes, and self-publishes, a zine called Azarakh. Her mosaic art and arts magazine can be viewed online on her website, aryanafarsai.com.



Chris Roth

A Chaplain's Tips for Dealing with Community Trauma

By U.R.I.



I am a Senior Chaplain with The International Alliance of Community Chaplains.

I lived for over 20 years in a well-known religious commune in America. We have also been termed a cult. I served there as a mother, teacher, auntie, and den mom figure for most of our hundreds of children.

Eventually the children grew, I was no longer in the commune, and I began work with Native American communities because of my roots there.

In my work with Native American communities I was offered the opportunity to become a chaplain because they observed I was “kind” to elders. Interestingly I ended up using my training mostly in outreach and service to my commune community. I have especially worked with our young adults, many of whom suffer from addiction and mental illness.

Here are my tips:

- Be a patient good listener. Do you know a good listener? Are you a good listener? This is the golden gift I received from chaplain training, my own parents, and my Native American culture. One who can listen carefully and compassionately is embracing a healing gift.

- Learn to repeat back to the individual in trauma a question to clarify if you heard them right. Example: am I correct that you are angry and feeling lost because of the abuse you feel your parents ignored?

- Don't offer solutions. Help the person in trauma find professional help. Psychology Today has an online list of local counselors and their specialties. They often include which professionals take sliding scale fees. As an advocate for the individual in trauma, I call the professionals on the local lists first to explore who is appropriate. I don't offer advice but I will ask: is there any way you think I could help you?

- Don't expect to be rewarded. People in trauma may not even remember later you were there for them. The important factor is their healing not your ego. Their suffering has obliterated their capacity for gratitude.

- If you are a believer in any form of religion don't be afraid to ask them if they would like prayer. Never push prayer, because if you are a believer you can also pray personally for them. That said, some have come back to me and reflected that my call to a higher power on their behalf strengthened them.

- Set boundaries: a few calls at 3 a.m. can be a lifeline, but persistent calls in the middle of the night are a sign they need more help than you can provide.

- One of the trickiest situations is when a person in trauma threatens to kill themselves (or someone else). Then I do call for professionals to get them help: I call the suicide hot line on their behalf, medical professionals, and/or the police if the individual is threatening another's life. In one case the woman no longer speaks to me but guess what—she did not kill anyone or herself, both of which she threatened to do. I also keep my address private as I did help a person who became a stalker.

- And last: Take care of yourself. Being a good listener and advocate can be draining. At the first sign of being drained I post on my messages, emails, etc. that I will not be available for calls and visits. I give myself as long as I think it will take: a day, a week, a month, etc.

In conclusion, through my training and experiences as a Chaplain and my cultural background, I have learned there is great healing power in developing and utilizing listening skills. Additionally, I can help others by not giving personal advice but pointing to those who are trained to give advice. Listening to those in trauma IS love. 🌸

U.R.I. is a grandmother, puppeteer, Native American storyteller, gardener, and a Senior Chaplain with International Alliance of Community Chaplains.

From Personal to Collective: Trauma Treatment as Violence Prevention

By Rebecca Hyman



Chris Roth

What is trauma? How do we recognize it, when it shows up in our communities or groups?

When I ask people who aren't therapists to define "trauma," they usually say that it's an "event" or series of events. They picture the event as violence one person inflicts upon another, or a violent dynamic that happens between two people in a relationship. These events cause sustained emotional pain.

Often, they'll finish their definition by telling me that trauma can be healed, even if it takes a long time. People need to build skills to manage their body's hyper-arousal, and to be able to differentiate between what's happening in the present and what happened in the past.

As a therapist, if I were to translate this description into clinical terms, I'd say what they're defining are the *symptoms and treatment* of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The traumatic event—experiencing or witnessing actual or threatened death or sexual assault—disrupts the brain's and body's systems of arousal. In order to heal, the survivor should learn *somatic practices*, to break the oscillation between hyper-arousal and hypo-arousal and return the system to homeostasis.

When I ask them how trauma shows up in their community or group, they'll often take a deep breath and sigh. Then they'll tell me stories of conflict. They'll tell me how much time it took to resolve the conflict, and how scary it was not to know if people were going to leave, or if factions were going to be created between survivors of trauma and bystanders.

They'll tell me how difficult it is to ask prospective community members about their mental health, let alone whether they have trauma histories, and how excruciating it is if a newcomer believes communities are spaces where old wounds will be healed by a new "family."

Often, they'll talk about how discouraging it is that even when so many in the group may understand differences of identity, privilege, and power, and have at least a rudimentary understanding of trauma, somehow these conflicts still erupt, apparently out of nowhere, with an intensity and a demand for resolution that often interrupts other essential work.

Two Visions of Trauma

In these stories, healing trauma isn't so much about managing one person's *symptoms*. It's about understanding the effects of prior and present violence on *interpersonal dynamics*. This distinction raises the question: what are the ultimate engines of these dynamics—political? structural? somatic?—and how should they best be addressed?

After I talked to people about individual trauma and its effects on communities, I realized what people were saying mirrored the differences between how trauma is described in the wider culture and how it's defined in therapy, which locates trauma in the "medical model" of diagnosis, treatment, and cure.

In popular culture, conversations about rape, for example, might start by focusing on an incident, and then move to questions about patriarchy and the lack of collective mobilization against sexual assault. Or, a hate crime might be discussed first as about the victim and the attacker, but then used as a catalyst

for a conversation about the carceral state and abolition.

A traumatic event, that is, can be seen not just as an incident of interpersonal violence, but also as the end result of larger systems of oppression, or ideologies of domination like patriarchy and white supremacy. What's complicated, however, is that the diagnostic category of PTSD limits the traumatic "event" to acts of interpersonal violence.

Thus, when therapists are trained in how to treat trauma, they're not given language or analysis to describe—let alone "treat"—systems of oppression and domination. These subjects are accordingly often left outside the frame of therapy sessions. Members of marginalized communities—those whose lived experience is often a combination of both structural and personal forms of violence—are then often left to decide if they want to bring these topics into session or, worse, to explain to the clinician why a traumatic "event" can't be treated by focusing solely on the individual body or mind.

...and Two Kinds of Healing

When trauma shows up in community, these two frameworks, these two ways of talking about trauma, often get mixed together, complicating not only the emotions people experience when they are in pain and conflict, but also how they understand what is needed to help, as one group recommends therapeutic approaches, and another sees healing not just as psychological and somatic, but rather about coming together to combat structural violence, oppression, and institutional power.

One thing that's crucial to know about the diagnostic category of PTSD is that it doesn't say that a traumatic event *causes* the person's symptoms. Because not everyone who experiences the same traumatic event will develop PTSD, the goal of the assessment is to determine the threshold at which a person develops symptoms, to track their duration and intensity, and to create a treatment plan that helps the symptoms resolve. The reason it's important to understand this thinking is that it explains why so much of the clinical treatment of trauma is fo-

cused on returning the survivor to a *prior level of functioning*.

When we treat trauma as a physiological response to an event, we can create a treatment plan and focus on measuring and attaining symptom reduction. In this approach, there's a discreetness and sense of control that both clinician and client can depend on. They can see and know that progress is being made. The survivor can re-attain their own power. The narrow focus can also bring hope: trauma can be understood and addressed, like any other mental health problem. Treatment doesn't have to last forever.

This approach to treatment is essential in the aftermath of a traumatic event, a period called *stabilization*. Often, however, after a person appears to have "returned to normal," a second, more existential set of questions can arise. The focus shifts from survival to *meaning*: why did this happen? How could this person do such a thing and walk away? Why do I blame myself for the event, when I was the one who was assaulted? Why did I participate in an atrocity, or fail to save a person, or commit violence against a person I love?

Each person will answer these existential questions in a different way. Some people may find spiritual and philosophical traditions compelling; others may want to engage in social justice work; others will want to focus on relationship dynamics, such as creating vulnerability, maintaining boundaries, and establishing trust. It's likely that in any community, members will gravitate to different traditions and practices to engage these broader questions about violence, accountability, and justice.

Restoring the Self, Restoring the Whole

What's challenging is not that a multiplicity of frameworks can be useful in navigating the existential questions about violence that trauma can raise. Rather, it's that when trauma erupts in a community, each person's relationship to institutional and structural power will be in the room, either explicitly or implicitly influencing the way trauma is perceived and how it is best thought to be healed.

When what a community hopes to "heal" is not just one person, but instead itself as a whole, it can be more useful to consider trauma as not an event, not purely a psychological or physiological period of chronic dysregulation, but rather as the shorthand term that encompasses how we personally and collectively understand and respond to *violence*.

When we shift the conversation from trauma to violence, the scope of what we're "treating" gets very big, very fast. But widening our scope also helps us build



Chris Roth

a bridge between the specificity and research that undergirds the medical model of trauma treatment and the larger, complex analyses of power, structural violence, and oppression that are necessary to understand the lived experience of the vast majority of people in the United States.

The Lost History of PTSD

One thing I like to remind myself of, when I consider these two ways of thinking about trauma, is the now mostly forgotten history of PTSD. We have PTSD as a concept and term today because veterans of the Vietnam War gathered in “rap groups” to talk about their participation in atrocities such as the My Lai massacre. Their clinicians, along with political advocates, activists, and family members, advocated for Vietnam vets to be seen as suffering from what they named the “delayed grief of soldiers.” This syndrome was affecting veterans en masse, but when they went to the Veterans Administration for treatment, they were being diagnosed with addiction and antisocial personality disorder, for there was no category for war trauma in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, the official list of diagnoses that insurance companies will reimburse for treatment.

The animating concern of all these people was to grant dignity to the suffering of soldiers and their loved ones. More importantly, however, it was to stop the Vietnam War. The clinicians and activists who described what the veterans were experiencing, and how their delayed grief was manifesting—in job loss, in disrupted sleep, in numbing and rage, in domestic violence and divorce, in drug addiction and despair, in homelessness and isolation—did so to help civilians understand the cost of war and its endless, radiating effects. For those who gave us the term PTSD, that is, there was no distinction between individual, collective, and national healing—one demanded, and was inextricable from, the rest.

After a decade of protests and public hearings, after hundreds of case studies had been submitted to countless committees and conferences, the American Psychiatric Association created the diagnostic category of PTSD, published in the *DSM III* in 1980.

This watershed moment finally validated the trauma of Vietnam. At the same time, by creating a diagnosis—rather than the “syndrome” that clinicians and soldiers had requested—PTSD located trauma within the medical model, stripping away the political and structural aspects of trauma healing that had been practiced for over a decade.

Reconnecting the Clinical and the Political

I close with this history because it so clearly pinpoints the moment the “political” was severed from the clinical in the mainstream, institutional treatment of trauma. Returning to it demonstrates that those in community today can make a different choice: they can braid together these two languages, these two frameworks for understanding violence. They can envision and then implement new ways to support the body’s healing, whether that body is individual or collective.

In the current moment of increasing authoritarian violence, much of which is institutional and structural, it is even more crucial to find new ways of thinking through and addressing trauma. To provide even more precise words to describe what is happening now can help people see what is needed, what has yet to be created.

Communities are special places. They have in their foundations the knowledge that when we come together to support each other through our most challenging and most brilliant moments, there’s a spiritual, creative, and ineffable energy available for transformative processes to take hold. The ultimate aim of trauma healing, as its founders so consistently and bravely articulated, is to prevent the violence from happening in the first place. 🌱

A trauma therapist for the past 15 years, Rebecca Hyman also teaches therapists, organizers, and educators about critical theory, social justice, trauma, and violence. She writes the newsletter Therapy for Social Change (therapysocialchange.substack.com). She’s a former professor of English and women’s studies, a rabble-rouser, and an avid gardener. She lives in Portland, Oregon with her wife, cat, and dog. This article is based on interviews with others who have lived in intentional communities for many years, her work with trauma survivors, and her experience in community, accountability processes, and activist groups. If you’re interested in consultations or training, you can reach her at rebecca@rebecca-hyman.com.



Trauma and Community: Why Good Governance Is Not Enough

By Dan Antonioli

Chris Roth

On a typical day in a community I used to live in, there was morning yoga followed by a group meal, astrology talk, and witty humor. It was another day in paradise and everyone fanned out into their respective activities.

Several members went into a consensus-based meeting, and the meeting didn't go well. The members emerged with tense body language and facial expressions. One member "lost" in a consensus vote and was fuming. Screaming erupted in the main house kitchen and everyone within earshot was pulled into the drama. Word spread throughout the community and an untold number of hours of discussion and processing followed.

A year later I myself got into a screaming match that echoed throughout the community.

While good governance was in place, and always evolving into refined and better versions of intentional community systems, the all-too-human dimension prevailed: governance and agreements could not put a lid on the underlying traumas. I've yet to live in a community where this wasn't the case, in spite of how utopian they looked from the outside.

One has to wonder how much litigation is based less on the material facts of the case and more on the deeply wounded people in the litigation itself. Intentional communities are not immune from this human condition!

Some might say that conflicts in community are a healthy expression of anarchy and that any kind of governance is oppressive and worthy of challenging. Anarchy aside, it's the underlying sensitivities, unresolved issues, and personal grievances that often prevail over governance. People are hurt and those hurts come to the fore.

Naomi Klein's short video *Years of Repair* shows what it will take to transition from years of social and ecological trauma into a sustainable and socially just future. In this scenario, there is so much trauma and damage to the world that the transition to a healthy future takes many years of repair. The video shows not just a potential socially just future, but what it takes to get there. There is no magic wand to make the transition. And as people enter communities with the hopes of leaving behind a dysfunctional mainstream culture and past traumas, many of those traumas follow them into the new communities and if not acknowledged can rear their heads.

In fact, the word "trauma" is everywhere now. Best-selling books, workshops, inspired talks, seminars, trainings, and an array of "trauma-informed" therapies are on the rise. It's a hodgepodge of meanings and offerings, but at least it's finally getting the attention it deserves. Beyond the obvious forms of trauma, such as war, physical violence, natural disasters, etc., there is a growing awareness that trauma comes equally in the form of: oppressive educational experiences, sibling rivalry, condescending rhetoric, financial hardship, a bad experience at the Department of Motor Vehicles, etc. This adds up considerably, so much so that it begs the question of who *isn't* traumatized?! Imagine putting several years of time, energy, and money into an ecovillage dream only to be told by your local building department that you can't do what you want to do!

However measured, conceptualized, or framed, the human condition is full of trauma, and intentional communities should be prepared to address them—

intentionally. How? Isn't nonviolent communication and consensus decision making enough to prevent disruptive emotional outbursts? If we are going to be "intentional" then how do we prepare for emotional eruptions and our own experiences? Instead of letting the chips fall where they may, perhaps we can acknowledge that there are traumas in our respective communities and make room for addressing them.

Governance and agreements help, in a big way. Instead of verbally attacking someone, a judicious use of NVC can soften communications and offers a pause before expressing anger or frustration. Instead of "winners and losers" with conventional voting, a consensus-based process can allow for a strong connection to a group as opposed to individuals either winning or losing.

At the same time, communities can benefit from having discussions, salons, reading groups, and the like to start the process of taking a deeper dive into the emotional body. Developing more emotional literacy and awareness of people's sensitivities can transform how we relate to trauma. 🐦

Dan Antonioli is a sustainability and social justice activist currently residing in upstate New York. Founder of the once-almighty Laytonville Ecovillage (laytonvilleecovillage.com), he focuses on integrating a deep shade of green with conventional development and enjoys fitting round pegs into square holes. Dan is available for consultations, networking, and supporting good causes. His website is going-green.co and he can be reached at solardan26@gmail.com.

Archetypes for Healing Trauma

By Kara Huntermoon



I found a massage practice that accepted my health insurance. At last! I could finally address the chronic pain lodged in my body.

As a farmer, I work physically hard, often long hours. But I trace the pain back to trauma from sexual assaults and domestic violence in my teens and early 20s.

I scheduled massages with several of the women practitioners in the group practice. No men. I didn't want men touching me.

After several months of massages, the female therapists were all booked—but the men had openings. I did some encouraging self-talk: “Kara, you are 45 years old! You can use your voice. If you don't like what they are doing, you can say something. What's more, these are professionals. Massage is their livelihood. If you tell them to stop, and they ignore you, and you make a fuss about it, they will lose their license! So go get a massage.”

Surprisingly, I loved the massage that day. I had been telling the women “more pressure, please,” without results. This man had the strength to get at the tension in the deeper tissue layers. I wept on the table, a deep healing cry about the ways I still limited myself unnecessarily.

Several months later, my self-care practice included weekly massages with two skilled male massage therapists. One notable day, Andrew worked on some chronic tension in my shoulders and neck. I cried as I heard the voice of my young adult self: “I didn't see it coming!” The muscles in my neck spoke of a long-standing terror that someone would hurt me as I had been hurt before—as I had been hurt when I didn't expect it. I had to be vigilant! Wasn't that what protected me? (I believe integration and learning is what actually protects me, but it takes time to update my body and nervous system.)

I heard the voices of female archetypes speaking to me as waves of integration washed through me:

The Maiden said, “I am going to love as if nobody would ever violate me.”

The Mother said, “I am going to protect you, because people will try to violate you.”

The Crone said, “I will remember, when you get hurt, that you are still whole.”

The Queen said, “I will transform violence into love.”

I realized that all four archetypes are necessary for an integrated and mature female power. In fact, I already had a profound experience with turning violence into love, when I chose to keep a child conceived by rape in my early 20s.

The archetypes need to be balanced: Too much Maiden energy, and I will not protect myself adequately. Too much Mother, and I will limit myself unnecessarily. I need the Crone to remember that I can survive the inevitable hurts of life, and the Queen to find my own power after the pain.

These archetypes come from an ancient Greek story that was first told at least 3,000 years ago. I've developed a retelling of this ancestral story, with a modern spin in the tradition of my Pagan lesbian feminist mentors. (That version appears in the digital version of this issue, as well as online at gen-us.net/persephone.)

Thank you, women of SisterSpirit in Portland, Oregon, and women of We'Moon, for guiding me on this healing mythological path when I was a teenager in the 1990s.

To continue reading, go to pages 62-65 in this issue's digital version, or visit gen-us.net/persephone.

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Photos by Kara Huntermoon

The Healing Journey

By Dianne G. Brause

As I begin to write this article, I wonder how best to present my ideas around the issues of Trauma and Healing, and especially how it relates to my many years in intentional community. As some of you may know, I was the cofounder of a community named Lost Valley Educational Center back in the late '80s. "Cofounding" meant that my then partner, Kenneth Mahaffey, and I "found" the land at Lost Valley pretty much abandoned and in total disarray, after a previous Christian-centered group named Shiloh had lost a court case, much money, and their ability to survive.

Kenneth, who had already amassed a bevy of properties in the San Francisco/Berkeley/Oakland area, wanted to create a project where people could learn to live together in community and to become a model of greater sustainability. The inhabitants could make use of shared resources, goods, and services, rather than following the prevalent American model of a nuclear family "needing" to own everything individually—whether or not the thing was used daily, weekly, monthly, once a year, or perhaps just left to rot or rust in an extra garage or an attic space full of spiders, dust, and busy rats' nests.

And, this property, reportedly for sale in Oregon, looked like it might perfectly fit the bill. It had 87 acres of land including a meadow and abandoned gardens, a small year-round stream, and a recently clear-cut forest, all of which could be rehabilitated. But better than that were the two dormitory buildings which had a combined 100+ bed capacity, plus 10 small, wooden cabins, a more conventional and modern fourplex apartment building, a classroom area with five office-size rooms, and a large kitchen and dining room, spacious enough to cook and serve meals to over 100 people simultaneously.

So Kenneth and I, along with several others, decided to take a road trip north to inspect the possibilities. What we found was indeed full of possibilities, but with a great need of hundreds of hours of men's/women's gruntwork and a great deal of money to pull off the transformation some of us had in mind.

All of that is backstory; somehow, with a big loan from Kenneth and lots of gruntwork, Lost Valley came into existence and began to form itself into a community. Essentially, the whole project was carried out by the seat of our pants, with no clear plan, design, or designated leadership. The community was whoever happened to come along with the willingness to stay and help out, by sharing whatever skills or resources they had accrued in their former lives. Some enjoyed the challenges and chose to stay on for a month, a summer, or even a few years, while others (like Kenneth) couldn't really feel comfortable or safe, not knowing what/who would come, with the next crazy idea of moving forward.

Nevertheless, we did move forward and slowly came to near-consensus on how we would live together, some guidelines to live by, and how to begin to create an income. One of the most fortuitous opportunities came along with the entry of a couple who had previously been a part of an organization that had offered a workshop designed to help people get clarity and forward momentum in their personal lives and relationships. We invited in a couple of facilitators from this original group to try it out in our context, and miraculously, it seemed a perfect fit, and we decided to make it part of our lives.

Wallah! Naka-Ima became a part of our regular life—both as a long-weekend workshop and as a strong influence in our weekly well-being meetings. We soon offered the long-weekend workshop not only to our membership but also to the outer world, approximately once a month over a period of nearly 10 years (in the last few years, it took the name "Heart of Now," having evolved and changed in some details, and since then it moved offsite and also branched off into "Solsara"). The workshop's structure involved between 20 and 45 participants in a room, with at least half of them being assistants who were graduates of at least one previous workshop themselves,

No matter what your circumstances, you probably had one, more, or many times when stressful experiences happened to or around you. Even if they weren't at a level that created clinical symptoms of PTSD, finding a way to release those feelings, thoughts, and/or bodily reactions can lead you to a life that feels more sane, relaxed, and even happy.



and, who felt called to support others in their process of becoming more whole in their lives.

Periodically, the entire room full of people was asked to stand up and go over to another and introduce themselves and often respond to a question asked by the leaders. After a few seconds, the crowd would “mill” again, stopping to meet and share with another, and so on for several rounds. But a larger portion of the weekend was spent with volunteer participants coming up on a low stage we called “the platform,” standing in front of the group, to be coached by two facilitators. Their time on the platform would generally start just standing and tuning into their bodies—especially their breathing, and eventually their thoughts and feelings.

Sometimes quickly, and sometimes after a longer period of coaching, the person would begin to share parts of themselves and their history, which often they had never shared before, even with their closest family members and intimates. These memories were sometimes acted out in shaking, sobbing, or screaming out-loud—wounds that they had carried for years and decades. Sometimes, there were even memories that they had not remembered since a specific incident 20-50 years past, which had been too painful or too shameful to hold in their consciousness. After a period of physically, verbally, and/or emotionally exhibiting the effects of this event, the person might feel “complete” or just too tired to go on, and they would return to their seat, while nearby assistants were available to give support.

Another important structure within the workshop were the periodic times where several assistants joined three participants in a “Triad,” sitting face-to-face with one another. During this time, each participant was given an equal number of minutes to share whatever was coming up for them, given what they had seen and heard so far. Often, they could relate to whatever they had seen on the platform, whether it had been a woman who had been gang-raped as a teenager, or someone watching a loved-one die, or participating in a tragic traffic accident that they had “caused.” Sometimes, it was the memories of a parent who had beaten them or been especially cruel to them or to a sibling, or being bullied in school. Occasionally, they had lost a beloved pet in a fire, while they had been held back from running into the danger; or it was the pain of saying goodbye to a champion 4-H sheep, goat, or pig they had raised, but now knew would be sold to a local grocery chain, slaughtered, and eaten by other people who never knew or loved the animal.

Pain and trauma came in many variations and was shared in many ways. Sometimes, a participant would run out into the forest and wail his/her pain away. Often, someone would cry softly as they were held and rocked by several caring assistants, until they felt somehow cleansed of the grief they had carried for many years. Occa-

sionally, a person with a minor or severe physical injury or ailment would suddenly connect it with an incident or time in their life when something happened to that part of their body.

Although we explored possible origins of participants’ distress, the letters PTSD never came up in Naka-Ima. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder was not officially recognized by the American Psychiatric Association until 1980, largely as a result of diagnoses of US Military veterans coming home from the Vietnam War. And it certainly wasn’t in the popular vernacular until later.

But now, in 2026, I see PTSD being spoken about everywhere. It is commonly used to relate to someone who seems to have depression, anxiety disorders, suicidal ideation, and sometimes substance use disorders.

Often in our Naka-Ima workshops, and at times just in our ongoing community life, we would observe the classic symptoms related to PTSD. (Mayo Clinic describes four main categories: intrusive memories, avoidance, negative changes in thinking and mood, and changes in physical and emotional reactions; see sidebar.) And while the majority of our Naka-Ima participants and Lost Valley Members had never been diagnosed with PTSD, sometimes some of them/us felt or acted in ways that reflected full-blown PTSD.

On the other hand, I am of the personal opinion that it is difficult, even

within the most protected American environments, for a person to go through a lifetime without experiencing some level of trauma within their body and psyche. Therefore, *all* of us may at times exhibit symptoms associated with PTSD.

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For myself, when I look back on my life, I can identify a number of external events that created trauma for me. For example, as a young person in the '60s who had gone as an exchange student to Spelman College (a Black Women's College in Atlanta, Georgia) and personally met Martin Luther King, and then later become a Peace Corps Volunteer at the behest of President John F. Kennedy, I was totally devastated at their assassinations. To this day, I shed spontaneous tears when I see pictures of those events on TV or in a movie. Mahatma Gandhi, another person I revered, had also been shot down in cold blood. The deaths of those three, among others, made me fearful that anyone doing courageous and positive things in the world would inevitably be killed by someone who didn't want their brilliance to shine forth.

And in much more personal history, I can imagine that several incidents in my life might have led to the symptoms that I notice within myself, even now, into my 80s! One symptom is a strange reaction I often have when my partner appears when I am unaware of his approaching

presence: a definitely overactive "startle response," often including gasping or crying out. It makes no obvious sense, as I trust him completely in his desire to take care of me, never cause me harm, and to protect me from all danger.

And yet it is there, along with a completely out-of-control reaction while riding in the car to any slight possibility of a collision with another vehicle or a sharp unexpected turn. This reaction can perhaps be attributed to an accident I had a number of years ago, where I fell asleep at the wheel and managed to roll my VW Pop-Top Camper totally over (360 degrees) and come up off to the side facing the opposite direction on a major roadway. I woke up to see people running toward the car, in order to pull me out before it ignited in flames (which it thankfully didn't do). Fortunately, I had only minor cuts and bruises, although my car was completely wrecked with a ripped-off roof and sliding side door.

Perhaps my startle response began much earlier—during my actual birthing experience. My brother, who was born 11 months before me, had had to be born by Caesarean Section, since my mother was small and his head was large. In those days, after one C-section, the doctors thought that all other births for that mother also needed to be done by C-section. I was expected as a Christmas baby, and there was a major snowstorm predicted, so my birth was "scheduled" to avoid both Christmas and the storm.

On the morning of December 12, 1944, without any warning (to me at least), my mother's belly was sliced open, and I received a sharp knife-cut over my eye. I was pulled out and put in a bassinet in a baby ward, rooms away from my sedated mother for the next two weeks. While she held me twice, she remarked in a journal that her newborn baby girl was "scrawny and ugly"! So, perhaps, that might have brought some amount of PTSD into my psyche, and especially when she later blamed me for ruining her life and hopes of eventually having 12 kids!

My next traumatic childhood experience came when I was three-and-a-half, playing outside near the barn where my father was pitching manure to spread on the fields. My four-and-a-half-year-old brother was with me and we were having great fun, climbing up and down on a pile of curved cement blocks which were left over from a new silo that my dad had commissioned a crew to build next to our barn. All of a sudden, the pile collapsed, landing on my left hand. I must have screamed and my father came running and carried me into the house. They called the doctor and he, thinking it was a minor childhood incident, said, "Put some ice on it and bring her into the office. I will meet you when I get done with my golf game." When he got to the office, he wrapped my whole hand in gauze and said to come back in two weeks! When we returned, and my hand was unbandaged, my middle finger had died and was promptly sawed off, there and then. My brother in a rare act of compassion said:



Photos by Zipporah Lomax (see also Solara.net)



“Don’t worry. Dianne, just drink lots of milk, and it will grow back!” Unfortunately, he wasn’t right, and two years later, I found myself in the Children’s Hospital in Columbus, Ohio facing an operation to rebreak my adjacent index finger and graft some skin from my stomach onto it to cover up the nearly exposed bone.

I specifically remember the plastic surgeon asking my parents if I hid that finger under my skirts, and I thought that was the most absurd question anyone could ask. I knew my left hand had been permanently damaged and I had apparently adjusted to the event and results of that first trauma. However, much more distressing to me was that my bed in the surgery ward was just next to a little girl, probably eight or nine years old, who had been in a kerosene fire and was burnt over 85 percent of her body. Obviously, she was sedated, but each day, when they came in to change her sheets, big messy, bloody, and pussy chunks of her skin would peel off along with the sheets! Seeing this was terrifying to me, and when I returned two weeks later to finish my skin graft, I learned that she had died!

Another trauma from the stay in that ward was hearing a little girl at the end of the room, screaming in the fear and pain of having both her eyes bandaged from the cross-eye operations that she had had. Not only was she terrified (in a ward where our parents were not allowed to stay with us), but the attendants had tied her hands and feet to the crib sides, so that she would not try to rip off her bandages. I saw her as I wheeled myself around the floor in a child-size wheelchair, which I was allowed to do, since I wasn’t in pain and wasn’t causing any disturbance otherwise.

These images that I saw there and the impressions I gained during that time were unforgettable, and yet, they gave me a perspective that no matter how much pain or trauma I might have, I would always have it easier than some people.

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Working in Birth Control Clinics in the Dominican Republic as part of my Peace Corps experience, and being a 10-year assistant for Naka-Ima at Lost Valley, I became quite aware of the fact that throughout the world, women and girls face ongoing challenges regarding sexual violence. Many females have faced rape and inappropriate sexual trauma perpetrated often by family members and people known to them. In the Dominican Republic, once a girl had been raped, she was considered “used goods” and was sent away to become a prostitute in one of the many brothels, regardless of her age. Since my two assignment sites were in port towns, and our services were free, we served anyone who wanted to practice “family planning/birth control” and receive a method of preventing unwanted pregnancies. Thus many of our clients

were prostitutes. Occasionally, we would get a girl of 12 or 13, who would come in holding her doll, wanting to not get pregnant. Although she couldn’t prevent her fate, which was to “service” any number of local men and visiting sailors every day, she at least wanted not to get pregnant and have a baby to tend to while also carrying on her “professional duties”!

Fortunately, I myself never had to face the trauma and shame of having been raped, even though I occasionally got myself into compromising situations in my international travels, and had to make it very clear that that was not going to happen to me. However, many of my women friends have had this difficult experience, and sometimes with the added insult of becoming pregnant as a result. In the Dominican Republic our Peace Corps project of creating birth control clinics in several parts of the country came about as a result of a study which showed that roughly one third of all women and girls coming into the Maternity Hospital in Santo Domingo were suffering from attempts at self-induced abortions, using coat hangers or stalks of cut sugar cane from the nearby cane fields! Thankfully, after hosting two sets of women Peace Corps Volunteers over the course of four years, the country went from providing no free birth control, to every girl/woman in the country having access to free family planning and a method of birth control of her choosing! In some ways, I feel that my part in

this endeavor may have been my greatest accomplishment so far in this lifetime.

Obviously, boys and men suffer from sexual exploitation as well, often from some authority figure that they should have been able to trust. Also, the extreme fear and trauma of war, torture, and death has been endured over time proportionately more by men than women. However, the long-term effects flow over to the whole family. The term PTSD actually was coined to explain the effects of trauma endured during the Vietnam War. And now, we seem to be playing that game again! Not only do the people actually fighting in Iran and throughout the Middle East suffer, but so does every person who hears the bombs and rockets flying overhead or blasting apart their homes and community buildings.

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What can be done to alleviate this syndrome, which seems to have been endemic over the centuries? Obviously, stopping wars and the schooled hatred of “the other” would go a long way to gradually rid the world of PTSD. And yet, the likelihood of that happening any time soon seems pretty remote at the moment.

A variety of modalities within the field of Psychiatry have had some efficacy. Several are listed in the sidebar of this article, but none seem to be foolproof. Several pharmaceutical medicines are sometimes prescribed, but they often have side effects and don’t seem to be especially good at doing more than alleviating the symptoms. So, are there any examples of positive cures for PTSD?

Years ago, I heard that certain Native American tribes had a practice of the women surrounding and holding the warriors, stroking and rocking them like babies immediately upon returning from their battles in a war. And, more recently, I saw a social media post where a young brave spoke of a ceremony where the Native soldier would collect small stones and go out to a running river. He would then recite his stressful memories of the battle: the killing, the dying, etc., one by one as he held a stone. Then he would throw the stone into the stream to be washed away by the flowing water. When he had fin-

ished with all of his stones except one, he would stop and bring that remaining stone home with him to remember the letting-go process.¹

I asked my women’s group for any ideas they had about this topic. One grandmother referred me to a group which purported to have success through a technique called the “Layered Transformation Method,” which uses a combination of hypnosis, meditation, and body modalities to lessen or alleviate PTSD and related symptoms. Its website describes this technique as “A unique blend of modern neuroscience and ancient healing traditions—working simultaneously on multiple layers of your nervous system.”

I have no idea which of these remedies might bring the most effective results, but I do know that the support and caring provided by our community’s Naka-Ima experience seemed to gradually aid many people in becoming more healthy and whole over time. I have personally observed people who had previously been experiencing symptoms such as fear, paranoia, anger, depression, and lack of self-worth become more trusting, loving, self-assured, and productive as a result of one or several weekends of self-reflection, emotional release, and mutual support provided by Naka-Ima.

Whether your community, family, or neighborhood creates a specific process for this kind of healing or just steps up to the plate in times of stress and violence, I highly recommend checking out some of these ideas, in support of yourself or others you know who are suffering from full-blown PTSD, or the more everyday effects of trauma and difficult events.

I am of the personal opinion that, no matter what your circumstances are or were in this lifetime, you probably had one, more, or many times when stressful experiences happened to or around you. Perhaps they weren’t at a level that created clinical symptoms of PTSD in you or others, but nevertheless, finding a way to release those feelings, thoughts, and/or bodily reactions might be an ideal way to lead you to a life that feels more sane, relaxed, and even happy.

Good luck on your journey to wholeness! 🌸

Dianne G. Brause was born on a farm in Ohio and now loves to interact with the dolphins who swim by her dock in Florida in the winter, and the cheeky chipmunks who beg for popcorn and peanuts outside her screen room in New Hampshire in the summer. She has written several articles for COMMUNITIES over the years and aspires to write her life story before she dies. However, she often turns to puzzles and sewing quilts for loved ones rather than to the discipline required for such an extended writing project.

1. For more information about one version of this process, see gen-us.net/lakotaspirit.



Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Information excerpted and adapted (with our thanks) from the Mayo Clinic, [mayoclinic.org](https://www.mayoclinic.org).

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that's caused by an extremely stressful or terrifying event—either being part of it or witnessing it. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety, and uncontrollable thoughts about the event.

Most people who go through traumatic events may have a hard time adjusting and coping for a short time. But with time and by taking good care of themselves, they usually get better. If the symptoms get worse, last for months or years, and affect their ability to function daily, they may have PTSD.

Getting treatment after PTSD symptoms arise can be very important to ease symptoms and help people function better.

Symptoms of PTSD:

Post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms may start within the first three months after a traumatic event. But sometimes symptoms may not appear until years after the event. These symptoms last more than one month and cause major problems in social or work situations and how well you get along with others. They also can affect your ability to do your usual daily tasks.

Generally, PTSD symptoms are grouped into four types: intrusive memories, avoidance, negative changes in thinking and mood, and changes in physical and emotional reactions. Symptoms can vary over time or vary from person to person.

Intrusive memories:

Symptoms of intrusive memories may include:

- Unwanted, distressing memories of a traumatic event that come back over and over again.
- Reliving a traumatic event as if it were happening again, also known as flashbacks.
- Upsetting dreams or nightmares about a traumatic event.
- Severe emotional distress or physical reactions to something that reminds you of a traumatic event.

Avoidance:

Symptoms of avoidance may include:

- Trying not to think or talk about a traumatic event.
- Staying away from places, activities, or people that remind you of a traumatic event.

Negative changes in thinking and mood:

Symptoms of negative changes in thinking and mood may include:

- Negative thoughts about yourself, other people, or the world.
- Ongoing negative emotions of fear, blame, guilt, anger, or shame.
- Memory problems, including not remembering important aspects of a traumatic event.

- Feeling detached from family and friends.
- Not being interested in activities you once enjoyed.
- Having a hard time feeling positive emotions.
- Feeling emotionally numb.

Changes in physical and emotional reactions:

Symptoms of changes in physical and emotional reactions, also called arousal symptoms, may include:

- Being easily startled or frightened.
- Always being on guard for danger.
- Self-destructive behavior, such as drinking too much or driving too fast.
- Trouble sleeping.
- Trouble concentrating.
- Irritability, angry outbursts, or aggressive behavior.
- Physical reactions, such as sweating, rapid breathing, fast heartbeat, or shaking.

Psychotherapy for PTSD:

Several types of talk therapy, also called psychotherapy, may be used to treat children and adults with PTSD. Some types of psychotherapy used in PTSD treatment include:

• **Exposure therapy.** This behavioral therapy helps you safely face situations and memories that you find frightening so that you can learn to cope with them. This is done in a gradual, predictable and controllable manner. Exposure therapy can be particularly helpful for flashbacks and nightmares. One approach uses virtual reality programs that allow you to reenter the setting in which you experienced trauma.

• **Cognitive therapy.** This type of talk therapy helps you see the ways of thinking, also known as cognitive patterns, that are keeping you stuck. Examples include negative beliefs about yourself and the risk of traumatic things happening again. For PTSD, cognitive therapy often is used along with exposure therapy.

Your therapist can help you build stress management skills to help you better handle stressful situations and cope with stress in your life. Skills such as relaxation, sleep, and exercise can be helpful.

All these approaches can help you gain control of lasting fear after a traumatic event. You and your mental health professional can talk about what type of therapy or combination of therapies may best meet your needs.

You may try individual therapy, group therapy, or both. Group therapy can offer a way to connect with others going through similar experiences.



Chris Roth

Homeward Bound through Smoke and Sound Nature, Nurture, Endless Streams, Cigarettes, and Magazines¹

By Chris Roth

Even those of us who know one another well still have room to know one another better.

Dianne (author of the preceding article) and I lived together in a tight-knit community for more than a decade, yet “The Healing Journey” still revealed formative details about her life that were new to me. If this is true for us, it seems likely even more true in most interpersonal relationships within community.

Community living can involve such thorough engagement with the present that the past may seem less important. The acts of co-creation and collective discovery offer the opportunity to transcend our individual worlds and internal echo-chambers and focus instead on a broader reality—such that we may minimize our own unique experiences and memories.

Yet those experiences do shape who we are and how we interact. We recognized this in the community Dianne describes, and devoted time to “going into ourselves” in addition to “getting out of ourselves,” discovering that a balance of those is essential for any group and its members to thrive over the long term. However, there was, and is, always more to uncover.

Dianne’s reflections inspired me to contemplate what core past experiences and influences I myself may or may not have shared about fully in those years or in the years

since—including some that only the passage of time has brought into more clarity.

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Whether we’re dealing with full-blown “trauma” or merely “significant difficulty/challenge,” taking the time to explore the forces that have shaped us as we are today can help us arrive much more easily at understanding, connection, and compassion. I find that my own reality, molded by certain core factors, is as deeply ingrained in me as it may be at times mysterious, difficult to understand, or even challenging for others. It’s the water I swim in, but it might indeed be a small, distinct pond with a unique ecosystem,



one of billions...at least for now, before it becomes a cloud or ocean again.

By stripping away everyday busyness and distractions, workshops like Naka-Ima² can slow down time enough for us to recognize better the water we're each swimming in, describe it to ourselves and others, and consider how to refresh it or get better aeration. Writing can do the same thing, especially when we share it.

I believe many communitarians could benefit from writing a history like the one Dianne did, sharing it with others, and reading everyone else's too. And since I'm a firm disbeliever in the philosophy of "Do as I say, not as I do (or don't do)," I'm going to attempt the exploration I'm suggesting others make as well.

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All histories are by necessity oversimplified—but for the purposes of this article, I'll boil down my core sensitivities and sources of potential trauma into three main tendencies, falling into two categories.

One category is "nature"—what I came into the world with. The other is likely a combination of nature and nurture. The most difficult events in my life, the ones coming closest to "trauma" and "PTSD"-like symptoms, have generally originated in one of these three main tendencies, or even more potently, in a combination of them.

In the "nature" category, I was born with and have continued to manifest throughout my life two strong physical sensitivities—one to sound, and one to

tobacco smoke.

As a young child I was terrified of loud sounds: sonically demonstrative adults, barking dogs, the rumble of a car, the roar of a vacuum cleaner, even the sound of a toilet flushing. I did everything I could to avoid them—including getting others to flush the toilet for me. Crying was a frequent reaction (and I apparently did a lot of it in general), until I was old enough to get that under control.

Over time I learned to be "tougher" and adapt, and teenagerhood brought an attraction to some forms of loud music that expressed likely semi-raging hormones (early-phase Elvis Costello displaced Mister Rogers on my turntable). But this attraction came to an abrupt end when I attended a too-loud rock concert at the age of 18 that left me with what an audiologist labeled "acoustic trauma." For several weeks, I didn't seem to be able to hear out of my right ear. (That one had been turned to the stage; I'd been sitting behind a wide, tall audience member and straining to see past them by leaning to the left.) When, starting a few weeks later, hearing returned, it would immediately retreat after just a few minutes of listening to amplified music again.

As a senior in high school for whom music had become important, I discovered that the only way to stop the disturbing return of apparent semi-deafness, accompanied by frequent rumbling in my right ear, was to stop listening to amplified music altogether. I eventually sold my entire record collection, got rid of my stereo, and swore off both recorded music and concerts—since the source of the trauma (amplified music) proved to be the thing that most dependably brought it back.

I also found that I needed to wear earplugs for many other tasks, including using a typewriter, hammer, or vacuum cleaner (something I could no longer avoid by that age). A long-distance runner during those years, I switched to running on the right side of any road, rather than the left side (preferred for safety)—and even so I often covered my right ear when traffic passed to avoid that disturbing reactive rumbling and hearing-numbing. More often, when there was opportunity, I would try to run somewhere far away from traffic.

Warning: A Bridge Too Far over Troubled Water

This article includes detailed, earnest, personal stories that both the author and the reader may find embarrassingly revealing. Never would such an extended monologue fly either at a dinner party, at a community meal, or in an interpersonal relationship—and it might take all the king's horses and all the king's men (or at least keen expressions of interest and willingness to share in return) to drag much of it out of the author in an actual conversation, especially outside the context of community. Lacking the opportunity for back-and-forth or for checking in on whether the listener is being bored out of their skull, the author plowed ahead regardless. He also used a term, "Source," that he might blush to say out loud.

Behind the embarrassment and shame that may accompany anyone's personal sharing, I suspect some culturally-ingrained trauma lurks that is common to most of us. "Homeward Bound through Smoke and Sound" is either foolish, indulgent self-seriousness or a courageous challenge to the message that we should all just keep it to ourselves and never be publicly vulnerable. Or, quite possibly, it's both.

Absent are many angles that would have made the article even longer: for example, the observation that the elements that trigger the author's sensitivities also damage the planet, the social fabric, and everyone's nervous system and well-being. The widespread noise and carcinogenic pollution of the fossil fuel age are driving some species to extinction and making others, including our own, less healthy. A feeling of disconnection from the earth, from each other, and from our own selves—whether the disconnection is physical or psychic, ongoing or sporadic, a background reality or brought about by "canary in the coal mine" sensitivities—is a challenge that can face any of us, not just someone who found the time to write a 5000-word article.

Enough, and very possibly more than enough, said.

—CR

For the following 12 years, including all of my 20s, I assiduously avoided recorded or amplified music—a choice that often separated me from other people, especially peers. I couldn't tolerate all the noise in my college dorm, so after my first college semester I moved off campus, and thus out of most of campus social life. This move contributed to the isolation and alienation that eventually caused me to leave that college after my sophomore year, in favor of the outdoor education (both formal and informal) that has made up most of the rest of my life.

I found that keeping distance from loud sound allowed my hearing to recover, and I also discovered a peace in natural sounds and in the natural world as a whole; the noisier, more built-up world I was living in before my hearing injury had created distraction from those. My exploration and embrace of rural living (far from the suburban New York of my youth) was thus both greatly facilitated and significantly motivated by the trauma I'd experienced to my already sensitive hearing. This retreat from a louder world—certainly not just a simple matter of preference or a journey into the immediately familiar or comfortable—was also a matter of emotional and psychological survival, the only way I could cope with my changed circumstances. I ended up fleeing the East Coast and starting a new phase of life out West, where I found opportunities to be much closer to the land and much further from ubiquitous traffic and from noise of every sort. These situations all involved various forms of ecologically-focused community.

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After about a dozen years of strict avoidance, I made tentative forays into deliberately listening to music again, and was happy to discover that folk music, even when amplified, did not actually send my hearing or psyche into a tailspin. I gradually re-entered the world of enjoying mildly amplified music, being careful to always wear earplugs for anything loud. Soon I started playing music too—resuming piano (which I'd learned in my youth), then switching to acoustic bass guitar and eventually regular acoustic guitar, which I liked most of all. For about 20 years, careful management on my part kept my physical challenges with hearing at bay.

Throughout all of this time, however, I could still experience trauma responses to sounds that were too loud for me, or that intruded on quiet when I needed it, for psychological and/or emotional even if not for purely physical reasons. Unwanted thumping bass sounds, especially at night or if interrupting attempts to focus on something else, as well as random background music of any volume, coming from a boombox or streaming from a phone when it's bird song that would feed my soul, have triggered visceral reactions from me throughout my life, especially since that late-teenage hearing trauma. This has been, at times, a major handicap when living in community—or anywhere—and I've navigated different ways of trying to deal with it, hopefully with increasing maturity and self-awareness even when it's felt like a survival-level distress. Communications around sound have sometimes felt charged (both to me and others), because of the amount of my associated angst, and also because of residual anxiety following aggressive reactions experienced in the past in response to requests to please "turn it down." Fortunately, everything can change, and this has been one of those areas of change.

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Apparently lessons remained to be learned, because 11 years ago I again faltered in self-care measures related to my hearing. As a result, I experienced greater hearing-related trauma than I ever had previously. I ended up with a large infection-caused hole in my right eardrum, persistent tinnitus precipitated by an apparently overaggressive surgery, a second surgery to attempt to repair the consequences of the first, and lasting effects physically this time, encompassing both some hearing loss and nonstop high-pitched ringing, which apparently (like Dianne's finger loss) are irreversible, no matter how much oat milk I drink.

This event, too, precipitated major changes in my life; I stopped leading bird walks,

gave up the guitar, and put a lot of energy into trying to salvage the situation physically. After a period of recovery, I also found other things to immerse myself in that would distract me from what I had lost and bring me other forms of purpose and fulfillment. My most effective medicine turned out to be volunteering in situations that demanded a high degree of focus on others, including a deeply satisfying stint helping in the elementary grades at a Waldorf-based public charter school.

More silver linings and even benefits of that second major hearing trauma emerged as well. The constant uninvited phantom sounds and absence of some other desired, high-frequency sounds in my multiple-times-roughed-up right ear—over which my only control is psychological, within myself—have put into perspective the unwanted external sounds which I more often used to try to control. I'm actually much less apt now to be overly disturbed or be the first one to complain about various sources of distracting or disturbing external noise; instead, I've learned better how to manage my responses internally. I know that my hearing will never return to Edenic levels (except in my imagination) even if the outside world quiets down entirely. Several therapies—including a "bimodal neuromodulation" treatment called Lenire, combined with cognitive behavioral therapy—have also helped with my psychological recovery from the ear damage and surgeries, even if that recovery may never be complete (and certainly won't be on a physical level).

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There's more to that "hearing" story, which I'll return to a little later, but for now I'll switch to the other main





source of purely inborn/physical challenge I've encountered throughout my life: a strong allergy to cigarette smoke.

Thankfully, growing up in a nonsmoking family, I spent little time around cigarette smoke as a child, but when I did, it was another source of extreme distress. Several times a year my parents would host dinner guests who smoked (in those days indoor smoking was the norm, and prohibiting it would have been considered inhospitable). I would inevitably end up in my upstairs bedroom, crying and with the windows wide open regardless of outside temperature. Starting at an early age, whatever the situation or its social expectations, the presence of smokers often instantly determined whether I entered a space or not, and smoking also established a firm boundary between those I might spend time with, and those I did not.

While I have gotten to know many more smokers in recent decades than I did as a child, and have a number of friends (mostly in community) who are tobacco smokers, I never spend time around anyone when they are smoking, and stay away immediately afterwards too if possible. In one well-known ecovillage, unrestricted outdoor smoking (the possibility of its happening any time, anywhere, with attendant drifts from any direction) contributed to my realizing I could not live there long-term. Restrictions on smoking (usually a designated smoking area, separate from main community areas, with no smoking allowed anywhere else indoors or out) were what made it possible

for me to stay in my two longest-term communities. Without those restrictions, I would have needed to leave those places as well.

Nausea, headaches, a feeling of doom, respiratory distress, inflamed mucous membranes, a sensation of toxicity coursing through my veins, mental distress, emotional dysregulation, and agitation—recalling some of my historical reactions to intrusive sounds—are predictable results of tobacco smoke for me. It's a huge contrast to how I usually feel when breathing tobacco-free air. I do anything I can to avoid the experience, or to minimize exposure before those full-blown symptoms set in.

My reactions to smoking, like my reactions to some sounds, have caused significant challenges in community—especially in communities where my sensitivities were not shared. Thankfully, these days, I find my sensitivities in these areas are shared by others—enough to put limits on both sound pollution and tobacco smoke pollution. These limits make living there sustainable both for me and for those others. At least some smokers have said they appreciate those limits too, as most of them actually aim to reduce or quit, and they also don't want their habits to ruin their relationships with those who are allergic or highly sensitive.

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Unfortunately, this kind of caring has not always been the norm. Even today I carry the residual effects of previous encounters with smokers that were much less pleasant than today's culture of mutual accommodation. My requests in some past situations that others not smoke in a common area (or I would need to go elsewhere myself) have provoked enough strong, sometimes aggressive reactions from smokers that it is impossible for me to forget this possibility any time I contemplate saying something in the present, even if the present smoker has never given a hint that they might be similarly aggressive.

In the most extreme case, a newer arrival at my former longest-term community, whom we'd taken on with little screening to help with a construction project, found me alone early one morning in our second-floor office, blocked the only exit, and threatened to kill me (the promised method: bonking me over the head with a sledgehammer). His justification was that I'd complained to another staff member about his ignoring our clearly-stated community agreement not to smoke in a central location. He appeared to be dysregulated to a nearly non-functional degree, and furthermore no sledgehammer was at hand—so I kept my cool, tried not to act intimidated, and, with no elevated response from me to feed off of, he backed out of the office after making his threat. I discovered that despite the calm I'd presented, I was now actually shaking, and as soon as possible I told another staff member what had happened.

Although this was not a place that prided itself on being a personally supportive environment, death threats tended to unite us, finally pulling together in support of the person under threat. (Another resident also went through this, a couple years later, for different reasons.) The person who'd threatened to kill me because of my smoking complaint was required to leave immediately, and did.

While his was not the only hostile reaction I've encountered to requesting that someone not smoke, it was the hardest to shake, and undoubtedly has created trauma not only around tobacco smoke and its effects on me, but around expressing my own needs to avoid that allergen, especially when it involves asking others to alter their behavior. As a result, when making that request, I notice that I am often tightly-wound and in additional stress (beyond that already caused by the smoke), adding an edge not only for me but for the other person, whom I often find it impossible to address with true calm in the moment, no matter how much I wish to.

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A third core vulnerability has accompanied these two bodily ones, and here the cause is murkier. I may or may not have been born with this one, but certainly it's become evident over the course of my life, shaped by and also shaping my experiences and

environments. Whatever the mix of biological, social, cultural, and/or ecological influences on it, this trait has interacted with my physical vulnerabilities to amplify, steer, and moderate my experiences, including traumatic ones. This trait may actually be universal, manifested in different ways within each of us. It might even fall into the category of “that which does not need to be said”—or can’t be.

Attempting to name the possibly unnameable, I’ll call this vulnerability a strong sensitivity to “connection to or disconnection from Source.” The “Source” referred to here can take many forms in my psyche—it could be my family (especially, unsurprisingly, my Mother), or my community, or a piece of land in particular, or land and the biosphere in general. It could be transposed into a potential or real romantic partner. It could be embodied in a beautiful piece of music, writing, or other artistic expression. It could reside in dreams, or in any experience of deep attunement. I can find it easily in the natural world and in people who are expressing themselves openly and truthfully.

Just as connection to “Source” feels like my lifeblood, disconnection from it can be incredibly distressing. Whereas my body’s reactions both to tobacco and to the wrong sounds at the wrong time can sever a feeling of connection-in-the-moment (a boombox blaring or an engine revving drowning out birdsong and wind rustling through leaves, for example), the more serious feelings of disconnection have deeper causes, producing more enduring stress.

I grew up very closely connected with my family of origin; a feeling of safety within their orbit was something I always took for granted. I never went off to summer camp with peers; we vacationed together as a nuclear family of four (giving me my first taste of rural life for a month in New England every summer). I eventually had much to learn away from that family—and gave myself plenty of opportunity for that, moving more than 2000 miles away after college and making the West Coast rather than the East Coast my home for most of the ensuing years—but separation from them was a quite difficult process emotionally. It was made more daunting, and almost impossible to express or confront, by the fact that late-stage teens and young adults were supposed to be excited to move away from home and be with peers, continue their evidently very important studies (in my case) or partying (in many others), pursue their careers, and create their own separate lives, families, etc. Feeling instead morose or depressed about that separation was not something that an 18-year-old male was supposed to experience, or even fully admit to himself.

Things in my life started to fall apart even before I needed to make that physical split. Various forms of “connection to Source” seemed less and less accessible to me as I became an accomplished, very serious student who felt increasingly separate from most of my peers, from “fun,” and from many elements of myself. It took only a little cracking of this persona, catalyzed by a platonic but intensely involving friendship that transformed my final summer as a high schooler, to know something had been missing. In my mind that “something” became the common mirage—and sometime reality—of re-connection to Source through a potential female partner.

I was devastatingly shy and nonassertive, for various reasons that would make for another article. As a result, I had almost never asked any romantic interest out on a date, despite strong crushes on a couple of them. So for me it was a major breakthrough when I actually asked someone “out” on my second visit to my soon-to-be college. She was a current student, a year ahead of me, who’d staffed the registration table on my first visit there; I had immediately felt an attraction as we talked. When I learned a concert was happening on campus the night of my second visit, I asked if she’d like to go, and she said yes. Success! I knew then that I was really busting out of my box, transcending my self-imposed limitations, never going to be shy any more, ready to pursue my dreams without shame or self-sabotage. Maybe the two of us were even meant for each other, and a connection to “Source” would be my partner forever.

But all does not go as planned or hoped. A few questions and answers here may reveal why: 1) Did I learn anything of significance about her at the concert that night, or have any real interactions beyond sitting beside her? No. 2) Did I spend the rest of my life with her, or even any time at all after the end of that concert? No.³

On the other hand, 3) Did I learn anything about myself that night? Yes—that I had

been so hungry for connection, even if I was just attending a concert with a Person of Interest, that I made the choice to endure what quickly became a great deal of pain in my ear caused by the level of amplification. Crucially, I chose to stay for the second half of the concert, and endure more punishment to my hearing, when the ear tilted toward the speakers was already throbbing with pain. Stuffing toilet paper into my ear canals on a visit to the bathroom between sets did virtually nothing to muffle the sonic onslaught, yet I still didn’t leave until the very end—so eager not to be lonely that my physical well-being seemed a trivial concern.

While I didn’t spend the rest of my life with her, I have spent it with myself—and have carried with me ever since reminders of that night’s fateful choice and the anxiety about disconnection that produced it.

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They say that old injuries tend to come back around. In my case, the physical trauma from that concert experience, on top of inborn hearing sensitivity, did even more than that; it intensified a second major ear injury 35 years later.

That one, too, came about because my emotional needs for connection overrode my instinct toward physical self-preservation. Conditions were prime for me to feel distressed for two main reasons. First, despite many dozens of visits over the years with my family of birth (usually a week to several weeks long, after which I’d return to my home a couple thousand miles



Design by Terra Bousquet, FaceTime photo by Chris Roth, 2020



away), I still experienced pangs of anguish every time they and I parted. Sometimes those were easier to ignore or recover from; at other times, I felt them especially strongly. This was one of those latter times, when for not entirely rational reasons I felt suddenly disconnected from “Source” as I made the return journey across the country.

The second, strongly compounding factor at that moment: the family to which I’d felt closest, ever, in community had recently completed a move into town. Suddenly the children I’d been spending many hours a day with, for several years, in the closest experience I’ve ever had to being a parent, were gone. I was left with just a bunch of adults (“boring adults” would be patently unfair, though it was my initial word choice here—likely I myself just became more boring when not around children). I missed the liveliness of my former part-time charges; the joy and connection I could experience more easily in their presence seemed to have moved away along with them. I was still feeling fresh grief from this departure, even as I felt the periodically recurring upset of having just left my family of origin back East.

Looking to ground myself emotionally upon my return home, and wanting to reconnect with a feeling of close family (which meant the one in town, since I’d just left my other one), I made a phone call to ask about visiting them. I learned that there was quite a bit of sickness in the family, but that I could visit if I wanted to.

I was uncertain what to do at first, but my decision was made more clear by an encounter I had as I started on a forest walk. Far away from our designated smoking area, a cloud of cigarette smoke hit me, and I quickly figured out that this was coming from the community member most responsible at that time for enforcing our smoking agreements. The instant experience of alienation that hit me along with this smoke was enough to convince me to drive to town rather than try to settle back into my community just yet, where despite all the positives that had kept me there for so many years I didn’t currently feel as close to anyone as I was to either of my “families.” Facing the choice between risking boredom, loneliness, and out-of-sortness, or instead risking sickness, I took the cigarette smoke as a signal to risk the latter.

And I did indeed become sick through that visit—more severely sick than anyone in the family, with infections strong enough to ravage my eardrum. Various other poor decisions followed (including too much trust in a particular medical professional, and several suspensions of critical thinking in my desperation for things to be better as soon as possible). My grief at separation from “Source”—as embodied this time by those closer family relationships—had intersected with my core physical traumas to upend my reality once again, with permanent consequences.

A decade of integration has led me to not be obsessed any more about any of this—what I could have done differently, the seeming magnitude of what was lost, the depression and overwhelm that followed that second “perfect storm.” Fortunately, this time around I had a lot more substantial and diverse forms of support, through community, family, and friends, than I’d had in my late teens, and was also more open to that support. And as described a few pages ago, many benefits have flowed from what seemed at first to be only loss.

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In the end, this article is meant to be more than self-therapy, although writing it has certainly been that for me. Many in the communities I’ve lived in are aware that smoking and noise have been challenges for me at times; but I doubt that anyone knows the entire story I’ve just told. Likewise, Dianne’s article revealed new layers of her experience to me, despite our long association and friendship.

I’m guessing that many communitarians, given this assignment, could write stories of equal length illuminating a lot about their own traumas and challenges and how those may have impacted, and still may impact, their daily experience and relationships. The practice of writing can uncover dimensions not as easily accessible in everyday life, where time and space may seem at a premium even in forums where we aim to provide an abundance of both to one another.

So, a final question and encouragement: Is a similar story waiting to be written by you, and shared with your own community? Might others in your group do the same? While nothing can substitute for in-person practices that cultivate connection, writing can be a powerful supplement within groups, with its own unique benefits.

I hope the seeds planted in this issue fall on fertile ground, and get the watering they’ll need. We’d love to hear about it, if so. 🐦

Chris Roth edits COMMUNITIES.

1. With thanks, and apologies, to Paul Simon; see gen-us.net/homeward.

2. See Dianne Brause, “The Healing Journey,” *COMMUNITIES* #212, pages 35-40; and Larry Kaplowitz, “Living ‘Naka-Ima’ at Lost Valley,” *COMMUNITIES* #104, pages 22-27.

3. To be absolutely accurate: we were in the same large Astronomy 101 class the following year, but never talked.

Lessons from Wheatsville

By Paul Freundlich

In spring 2025, my wife planned to attend meetings in Austin, Texas, a town that had some resonance for me. Half a century ago, Austin Community Project (ACP) became one of my touchstones for exploring the development of intentional, systemic models of urban cooperative communities. I was curious what remained of the innovations that had seemed so provocative and worth sharing with our readers when I was an editor of *COMMUNITIES* so long ago.

Googling “Co-ops Austin TX” yielded a website for Wheatsville Food Co-op with 29,000 members—a promising start. I followed up with phone calls to a few of the managers. They agreed to a visit, and I sketched out the basis for an article with this magazine’s present editor that would track what might be learned from what had flourished and what had failed.

As I embarked on my Austin adventure, I refreshed memory by going to my stacks of *COMMUNITIES* back issues. Sure enough, #19, March/April 1976, had a whole section on the new and vital cooperative movement in general, and ACP in particular.

As Bill Meacham and John Dickerson later reflected in “The Collapse of ACP,” “ACP began a heady two year climb until the spring of 1974. There were perhaps 1000 members. Its purpose was to create and maintain a cooperative community in central Texas. Two years later, the organization dissolved amidst panic, accusations and bad feelings. The vision had out-reached our grasp...lack of capital and skills. We had a lot of bozo ideas.”

Whoops! *Under-capitalized, missing key skills, bozo ideas.* And yet, half a century later, the inheritor of those bozo ideas, Wheatsville Co-op, is still making shopping for food in Austin a sustainable, community experience. A question remains—given the scale of ACP’s intention, does that matter? Is that enough?

ACP sought to achieve values-based, vertical and horizontal integration. Food would be fairly produced, priced, and consumed, farm to table. Cooperative households and collective businesses would extend the functionality of the model to a broader vision of how life could be lived, even within the competitive demands of a dominant market economy. Every transaction that occurred within the ACP network should reinforce and substantiate a sense of community, creating a social matrix as important as the economics.

As I perused the pages, I reacquainted myself with the organizers I’d shared intentionality with. Some remain admired friends; others cashed out, passed on, or just went elsewhere. What factors made a difference?

• **Location:** College towns, particularly those with a progressive bent. Besides Austin, that issue of *COMMUNITIES* featured cooperative systems in Berkeley, Minneapolis, Madison, and New Haven. A critical mass of young folk and faculty set the tone of curiosity and enthusiasm, and involved recurring cycles of fresh students.

• **Isolation:** Low-density rural areas tend to be less attractive to commercial development. Folks banding together to provide services informally or structured as cooperatives also serves a social function. One of the largest and most successful food co-ops is in

Arcata, on the north coast of California, which was a cover story for *COMMUNITIES* #34.

• **Education and competence:** Mobility and community are often at odds. Ironically, the availability and dependability of gifted and talented leaders, or even a leadership class, comes with inherent risks. These are likely to be the same people who have the best opportunity to move ahead in the mainstream with their lives. Jobs, income, kids, travel all accrue and become factors in who sticks around.

• **Stages of life:** Susan and Lew were communal housemates of ours in the ’70s. As their professional lives moved them about the country—Sue as a Nurse Practitioner, Lew as Director of Economic Development for various towns and cities—they found more traditional rentals practical. Yet their communal experience had been a high point. As they headed towards retirement in Portland, Oregon, they joined with two dozen similarly inclined seniors to create one of the sweetest cohousing constructs I’ve ever visited.

• **Professionalism and activism:** Another *COMMUNITIES* issue



Photos courtesy of Paul Freundlich



from the '70s featured the San Francisco-based New School for Democratic Management. I joined Lew, who'd graduated from Yale's School of Organization and Management and helped organize the New Haven Food Co-op, on the faculty for NSDM's initial, two-week program, which brought together entrepreneurial activists seeking the necessary tools to institute long-term success. Though NSDM is long gone, and the New Haven Food Co-op folded after an honorable 10-year run, many co-ops and small businesses internalized a mix of democratic management, community involvement, and social/environmental commitment.

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Which brings us back to the state of the cooperative arts, circa the fraught 1970s. The same issue of *COMMUNITIES* that described ACP also featured the seizing of the Warehouse that served as the central distribution service for the Minneapolis/St. Paul food co-ops. A self-styled proto-Stalinist cohort had acted for what it perceived as the best interests of the proletariat. As an outsider, I had non-combatant status, which gained poignancy when a mainstream liberal leader slipped me a note to be delivered to his romantic non-attachment, the next time I crossed battle lines.

Of course, Minneapolis has worse problems these days. In the 1970s, when ICE storms were merely associated with cold weather, solutions to our ineptitude and innocence seemed just around the corner.

Returning to New Haven from my summer '75 expeditionary travels, I had my own struggles, romantic and otherwise. A \$250,000 grant, Training for Urban Alternatives, which I'd scored from the National Institute of Mental Health in 1974, sought to apply the principles and practice of community and cooperation to every aspect of urban life. Bizarrely, I was challenged from both the Left and the Right, with intimations of the Weather Underground thrown in for good measure. By the time things settled down, I'd survived as leader of our grant's Administrative Work Group, learned a lot more about community organizing, but lost my principled lover along the way (it hadn't helped that my continuing title interfacing with the Feds was "Principal Investigator").

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Walking the aisles of Wheatsville Co-op with so many ghosts, as I have walked so many highways and byways, can I find a useful distillation to help us craft a credible communitarian future?

Between environmental and political dysfunction, even posing the question may be a stretch. I could of course argue that the need for coherent and sustainable communities is all the more critical. For sure, during the 11-day gathering of 400 or so adults and kids at our Dance New England summer camp, it felt that way. Let's roll with the positive for a while:

- **Intentional community is more of a path than a destination.** Yes, the full boat might sail into a cooperative future with a committed crew. Yet most neighborhoods, many organizations, and a goodly number of projects provide opportunities for extending the depth and breadth of community beyond formal intentional community. Some paths will lead to a dead end like the neighborhood pickleball game my wife was cheerfully invited to join. Once was enough for her, but friendly waves on our evening walk is a better rite of passage than eluding barking dogs.

- **Improvisational alternatives.** Formulas constantly displayed on TV promise to deliver panaceas for almost every aspect of ill health. Meanwhile, an improvisational culture that includes a bountiful gift basket of disciplines and delights is being harvested. There are enough crossovers that the mainstream has taken notice: non-alcoholic beer is nudging its way onto supermarket shelves in the same way that organic foods once did; improvisational dance, which depends on a constantly inspired intuition that breaks habit patterns, has been medically determined to inhibit the calcification of Parkinsons.

- **Identify priorities.** It's a big, wide world, and trying to fix all that's gone wrong is a constant distraction matched with the attraction of all that could go better. When conceiving or sustaining a community, best to pick a few aspects which fit with the skills of those involved, address needs not being well-served, and focus on one or two accomplishments that could set the table for greater success. When I circulated a flier for Dance New England as a week-long, playful experience the summer of 1980, I already had a rural site at my disposal, and knew the target audience from my organizing of a New Haven dance. What could go wrong? Not much, and almost 50 years later, DNE is going strong.

- **Consider the big picture.** The *Whole Earth Catalog* offered a tantalizing glimpse of the future. The response indicated great interest, but it wasn't exactly a catalog—it included no mechanism for purchasing the goods and services displayed. That void was partially filled by the Co-op America Catalog, which I launched in 1982. The boast of "If the business of the USA is doing business, let's do it our way" resonated sufficiently to be quoted in *The New York Times*, and encouraged the success of new products and services like socially screened health insurance, investment funds, and woman-led companies, by providing a sympathetic outlet for sales consistent with our values.

- **"Replace ambition with curiosity"** was a guidance offered by Nancy Stark Smith, one of the founders of a creative dance form, "Contact Improv," and editor of their magazine, *Contact*

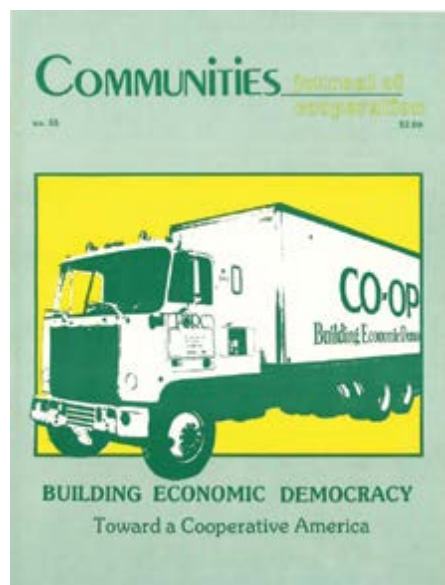
Quarterly. In my last conversation with her (shortly before she passed) we speculated that “intention” could legitimately derive from curiosity, and acceptably modify ambition. Whether in solo, partnership, or group form; the arts, politics, or business; relationships, small or large—pay attention to the context and choreography and discover the inherent opportunities.

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Back at Wheatville, I tossed out a few names to staff. One, Gary Newton, was a friend I remembered being deeply involved with ACP. His name also showed up as one of the original organizers of Wheatville. Several generations of leadership have passed since those wild and woolly, bozo days. Remembered or not, credit for successfully passing the torch without burning down the house belongs to all those whose choices to commit made a difference.

It turns out that establishing cooperation as a cultural norm lights a path of intentionality. The path takes some curious twists and turns, but community may lie just around the corner. In these troubling times, let us reach out, taking solace and joy in one another. 🐦

Paul Freundlich has been an active participant and creator in the development of cooperative, communitarian, and sustainable alternatives for more than 60 years. See exemplars.world and COMMUNITIES back issues for more of his writing.



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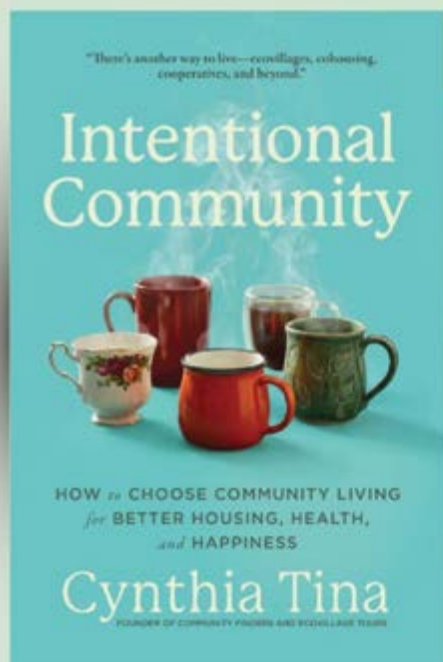
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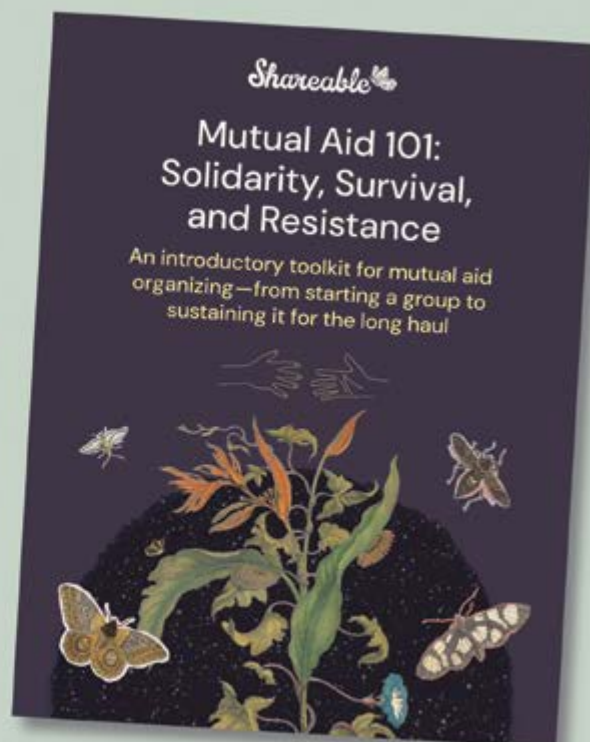
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The Story of Persephone

By Kara Huntermoon

This retelling written November 2022; see Kara's new introduction to it on page 34 of COMMUNITIES #212.



Kore is the goddess of flowers—beautiful and soft, radiating from her center, perfumed and enticing. Not enticing like a seductress, but inherently attractive, unfurling in her season, innocent and potent. She is the time of pollination, of youth before first fruit. It is relevant that Kore's name is the same as an apple's core: the star-shaped chambers where the seeds are protected, encased, kept dormant.

Demeter, Kore's mother, is the goddess of grain. She is a busy woman. She travels all over the world, ensuring the ripening of annual storage crops which sustain civilization. She has a good job, and she wanted children, so she didn't let a little thing like being single stop her. She can afford good childcare!

Demeter enlisted the help of nymphs, female nature spirits who cannot exist if separated from their waters, soils, trees, and ravines. Kore's best friends were all nymphs who lived in a specific flowery meadow, bounded by a peaceful river of clean water, with a border of fruit trees holding back the forests and mountains.

Confident that her precious daughter was safe, protected, encased by the constant attention of her nymph friends, Demeter worked to sustain civilization with abundant crops of grain. Because this is prehistory we're talking about, grain-ripening was a year-round vocation.

In the flowery meadow where Kore dwelt, springtime blossoms were abundant year-round as well. One day, Kore felt just a little bit bored with the constant sameness. She wasn't a child anymore, but she wasn't quite sure what came next. She wandered a little farther from her friends as her eyes explored the field's edges, and she sighed.

Suddenly, Kore saw something she'd never noticed before: a crack in a rock, right behind a flowering quince bush. The black opening was mostly obscured by the shrubby quince's bright red blossoms, so Kore crept closer to peer inside. It was a little cave,

just large enough for her to enter, and it seemed to continue as a tunnel into the mountainside. She looked around to see if any nymphs noticed her, but they were all complacently laughing and talking on the other side of the meadow.

"I'll just crawl under the bush and peek inside," thought Kore. And she did.

"It's not so dark after all. I'll just go into the cave and see what's there," thought Kore. And she did.

"I wonder where this tunnel goes? I'll just follow it a little way so I can see," thought Kore. And she did.

"This tunnel is getting smaller, but I still fit. It probably ends soon. I'll find out," thought Kore. And she did.

The tunnel ended in a very tight spot where Kore could neither turn around nor back out. Frantic, she cried for help. The nymphs were too far away, out in the bright sunshine among the flowers. They couldn't hear her. But someone else heard her. Someone underground. And he helped her—in a way. He caused the floor of the tunnel to collapse so Kore could escape—downward.

Kore landed in a large underground chamber with a throne at one end and many tunnels opening out around the edges. On the throne sat Hades, the king of the Underworld. He was surprised to see Kore, but also pleased. When he found out who she was and how she came to be there, he begged her to stay.

"You might like it here, once you get to know us," wheedled Hades. "All the wealth of the world comes from my kingdom: gold, silver, gemstones, and fossil fuels. The dead dwell here. Many of them are very intelligent, creative artists, loving parents, or have other life experiences that are endlessly fascinating. The dead carry much wisdom and can hold interesting conversations. Plus, I like board games. I have an entire collection.

Do you like Checkers? Or Blokus? Dungeons and Dragons? Oh, I know, Forbidden Island! It's a cooperative game!"

Hades seemed nice, but Kore was out of her element. She didn't know how to judge any of these completely new experiences. So she wasn't comforted.

"I don't like it here! It's dark and cold and there's a lot of shadowy wraiths wandering around! Your throne is black and your face is white and I don't see a single flower anywhere! I want my mother!" Kore burst into tears.

Hades awkwardly patted her shoulder and glanced desperately around the room. Various wraiths shrugged helplessly. Nobody knew what to do.

Meanwhile, up on Earth, Demeter returned home from an exhausting day at work to find the nymphs inconsolably crying.

"What happened? Where's my daughter?" cried Demeter.

"We don't know! We didn't turn our backs on her for even one second, we promise! She just disappeared!" wailed the nymphs.

Furious and frightened, Demeter flew around looking for Kore. She asked all the gods and goddesses if they had seen her precious daughter. Nobody knew anything.

While she searched, while she grieved, Demeter could not work. Making grain grow was the last thing on her mind. As her search dragged on, crops began to fail. Fungus infected the wheat. Barley withered. Buckwheat dropped kins flowers to the ground, and never formed seeds. Hungry birds stripped the unripe millet.

Finally, Demeter asked Hecate if she had seen Kore.

Hecate is the goddess of crossroads, both literal and figurative. When we make a major decision that changes the course of our life, Hecate is always there in those moments, observing humans as we exercise free will. She does not shape our choices, but merely gives attention as she holds the doors open. The terror we may feel when facing uncertain potential futures—that terror is associated with Hecate. The sense of euphoria and wonder when we realize that forces outside of our control combined with our own actions to shape a positive outcome—a serendipitous result—that magic feeling

is associated with Hecate. Hecate has three faces, which allows her to look down every pathway, and to embody every life stage at once (maiden, mother, crone).

Of course Hecate had seen Kore. Hecate was there at the crossroads when Kore decided to crawl into the cave.

"Your precious daughter is growing up, Mother Demeter," crooned Hecate after revealing Kore's whereabouts. "You cannot protect her any longer. You must allow her to exercise her own free will."

"No! You are wrong!" screamed Demeter. "My innocent daughter would never do something so foolish as to crawl into a dark cave alone! She's a good girl, always following the rules I set to keep her safe! Hades must have come into the meadow and abducted her!"

Haunted by Hecate's crone cackle, Demeter flew to Mount Olympus to plead with Zeus, king of the gods.

"Hades abducted my daughter and is keeping her prisoner in the Underworld! You must help me save her!"

"The Underworld you say?" replied Zeus. "Hades? That god couldn't abduct anyone! He's pathetic! Always being kind to women, comforting the sick by ending their suffering, blah blah blah! As far as I know, he's never raped a mortal! Can you believe it? And he calls himself a god! It's hard to believe we have the same parents—we're too different to be brothers."

Demeter continued her refrain, begging all the gods for help, with varying responses:

"How could Kore be attracted to Hades? He's such a sad boy!"

"To each their own, I guess. That's what you get for being overprotective, Demeter."

"Poor Kore never saw a real man! I could show her what she's missing!"

"Demeter, why are you going on and on about this? All kids grow up! I wish mine would grow up faster!"

"How did Kore get past the guards? When I tried to visit Hades, his three-headed dog chased me off."

"Do you think Kore knows how to return to Earth? The path isn't exactly well traveled! Mortals never come back after they die, and Hades is a serious homebody."

Demeter seized on this last comment. "That's what I'm saying! She needs help to get home! She's just a child!"

"Well, let's wait a little while," chuckled Zeus good-naturedly. "My brother doesn't have pretty goddesses falling through his roof every day! Maybe she can cheer him up





before she finds the way home.”

Demeter stormed out of Olympus in a rage. She may not be able to reach the Underworld herself, but she could send a lot of humans there.

Demeter’s tears fell to Earth as rain. Her howls swept the fields as cold wailing winds. The sky grew dark with her grief. She chased the sun away a little earlier each evening, until the days were too short for plants to grow. The plants bent like old ladies under frost. Dryads, the spirits of trees, hid deep in their trunks and roots to escape the cold. Leaves fell off the branches because the sleeping dryads couldn’t keep them green. Crops withered. Desperate animals, adapted to year-round summer, broke into human storehouses and ate what they found there. Humans began to die.

As they starved, they prayed.

Now, the gods like to receive prayers—usually. They find most human pleas amusing, because they are well aware that humans get themselves into huge messes and then expect the gods to rescue them. “You have free will for a reason, folks,” they shrug. “Use it better and you won’t suffer so much. Maybe you should reassess your priorities.”

Prayers extolling the greatness of the gods please them. The arrogant ones preen in front of mirrors and repeat the prayers like a mantra: “Yes, you are so right. I really am the most influential, the most beautiful, the most worthy of your attention!” More modest gods are grateful they got noticed. Hephaestus, the god of blacksmithing and carpentry, just wants to get stuff done. He’s glad when people pray to him because it generally means they are trying to improve the quality of their craft—and he finds good craftsmanship deeply satisfying.

But prayers like these were frankly disturbing.

“How much longer will we have to listen to these humans cursing us?”

“I can’t take it any more! The wailing, the pleading—and this time it isn’t their own fault!”

“Who will worship us if the humans all die?”

“We have to do something!”

“Demeter is throwing a tantrum! All children grow up. She needs to accept that. I hate giving in to tantrums,” protested Zeus.

“There won’t be any pretty young maidens for you to ogle if the humans all die, Zeus,” sneered Hera. She knew how to get his attention.

“Oh, all right. Where’s Hermes?”

Hermes is the messenger god. He wears winged golden sandals fashioned by Hep-

haestus (with stunning craftsmanship, of course). His job gives him special privileges—including the ability to travel to restricted areas in order to deliver the news and the mail.

“Hermes, go down to the Underworld and find Kore. Beg her to come home. She has to stop her mother’s tantrum or we won’t have anyone left to worship us. And tell Hades I’m glad he’s finally got some.” Several gods and goddesses rolled their eyes as Zeus leered.

Clearly, Demeter had good reasons to protect her daughter from her male relatives.

Down in the Underworld, Kore was moping. Hades tried to cheer her up, but nothing worked. He finally just sat near her, keeping her company. “I wish I could make it better,” he sighed. “But at least you don’t have to be alone with these feelings. I’ll stay with you.” Fortunately, the wealth of the Underworld included very good workers to take over any task that Hades would normally do. He could give all his attention to Kore.

When Hermes arrived on his golden sandals, Kore couldn’t believe it. “How did you get here?” she asked.

“Through the door and over the doggy’s heads,” said Hermes. “How did you get here?”

“Through a tunnel that I never should have entered! I want to go home!”

“That’s why I’m here,” said Hermes. “I have a message from Olympus. Your mother is throwing a giant tantrum and it’s killing all the humans. We need you to show her you’re okay so she can go back to work.”

“Flowers! I can see flowers again!” gushed the goddess of flowers.

“Well, not right away,” hedged Hermes. “Your mother has killed all the flowers, too.”

“What?!? She killed my flowers? How dare she!”

“Why don’t you come fix it, then, like a good girl? I’ll show you the way out,” suggested Hermes.

“Wait! Before you go, I need to tell you something,” Hades insisted.

Kore remembered all the time he had spent trying to make her happy, and just sitting with her in her misery. He didn’t need her to be good, or nice, or pretty. (Just look at her grief-tangled hair and

tear-streaked cheeks. And how long had it been since she'd bathed?) He seemed to genuinely like her, even when she raged and screamed at him. So she paused to hear what Hades had to say.

"Kore, I love you. I want you to be happy. If going home will make you happy, I will learn to live without you. It has been so hard to see you wasting away, refusing food and water for months. I want you to be well and healthy and strong. Now that you're feeling better, would you eat something with me before you go?"

"Is that all you want?" asked Kore. She sat down on the throne and ate six pomegranate seeds.

Suddenly, everything changed. Instead of seeing shadowy wraiths floating by, she beheld the shining spirits of the dead, their personalities radiating out like bright flowers. The cavern seemed brighter, and she could discern various colored jewels, gold, and silver shimmering deep within the rock. The sun may not be shining on Earth, but she felt the warmth of fossilized sunlight, the coal and oil that held ancient energy, in a kind of sunshine that never gave way to night.

Kore looked at Hades, and saw a man who would not try to control her. Unlike her mother's meadow where she couldn't pass the boundaries, in the Underworld she could do and be anything she wanted.

What *did* she want? She listened within herself, and also to the rhythms of the rocks and spirits around her. She could hear the wails of mortals mourning the recently dead. She remembered her own longing to go home.

Suddenly she knew what she wanted. "Can I come back?" she asked Hades and Hermes.

"Yes! Please come back! The guards will know that you belong here," said Hades.

"Whatever. Just calm your mom down first," said Hermes.

Kore changed her name to Persephone, the Queen of the Underworld. She brought the female capacity for birth to balance Hades' male leadership. After she became queen, she made a new law: if you wanted to go home after arriving as a dead spirit, you could do that. You just had to be reborn as a baby, so it wouldn't upset the balance up above.

Persephone married Hades, a faithful

husband who loved to support his wife's projects. Unlike the other gods, he never cheated on his wife. When Persephone decided to spend half of each year with her mother and the flowers, Hades took a pass. He liked to stay underground, thank you!

"I'll miss you! Have fun, Honey! Give your mom a hug from me!" he smiled as he waved goodbye.

Demeter never quite got used to her daughter growing up. She kept accidentally calling her Kore. Persephone corrected her as patiently as possible, knowing her mother was a very busy woman and had other things on her mind. But after six months of visiting Mom and making the flowers bloom, Persephone went home to Hades and the Underworld. There, she breathed a sigh of relief, stopped wearing deodorant, let her leg-hair grow, and snuggled up with Hades. They told each other stories about their time apart, and laughed comfortably as they gazed at each other with adoring eyes.

Demeter knew where her daughter was, and, strange to say, it seemed like she was happy. Queen of the Dead? It wasn't the life Demeter would have chosen for her dearest girl! There was no reason to throw a tantrum when Persephone went home to Hades—but Demeter just couldn't manage to get out of bed and go to work. What could her daughter see in him? Demeter was never impressed by any god. By the time she became an adult, she had had far too much of gods' attentions!

While Demeter worried away her time, the days got shorter, frost kissed the croplands, and people prayed that their stored foods would last until the sun returned. In late December, it dawned on Demeter that her daughter's absence was half-way over. She dragged herself out of bed and aired her work clothes, but she still didn't want to leave the house. Only when spring flowers heralded Persephone's visit did motivation return for Demeter. She would see her daughter again soon! Life was worth living! And gosh, she'd been in bed for how long? She had a lot of work to do!

We call the time when the days are short and cold "The Persephone Period," because the Queen of the Dead is in the Underworld. She's not making flowers bloom then—she's too busy helping the dead rebirth into life. I guess she is a little like her mother, in a way: a bit of an overachiever, hmm? She has two jobs and a kingdom to manage. Good thing she has such a supportive husband! 🌸

Kara Huntermoon has an intergenerational commitment to Oregon's Southern Willamette Valley bioregion, where she lives in community and teaches Permaculture. If you want more, check out her new Substack about Ecological Integration: karahuntermoon.substack.com.





Broken Open— and Emerging More Whole: Loss, Joy, and Reinvention through Community

By Thomas Mengel

*There is a particular kind of exhilaration that comes not from soaring,
but from choosing to jump.*
—Søren Kierkegaard

I have jumped many times. I stumbled often. I hope to jump again.

I have not always jumped with exhilaration or from solid ground. Some of my most important leaps began with a slow, private recognition that something essential had stopped working—a marriage that no longer provided the closeness I was yearning for, a faith whose beliefs no longer matched my understanding, a professional identity which has run its course. The jumping came later. First came the long, uncomfortable season of sensing or knowing that something is off.

Looking back across 25 years of transformation, what strikes me most is not the difficulty—though there was plenty of that—but the extraordinary richness that came from taking those leaps honestly: acknowledging both what was broken and what was possible. Each jump opened a world I could not have imagined from the ledge before it. And each world, it turns out, was populated by remarkable communities of people who became the real substance of my story.

This is an essay about reinvention—the full version, which includes both the courage of the jump and the weight of what precedes it and of what is left behind. About what happens when you choose, repeatedly and with your whole self, to grow. And about why the communities we build and belong to are not the backdrop to that journey. They are the journey itself.

A Life Lived in Bold Chapters

My first major leap came in the late 1990s. My marriage, after years of growing apart, had become a place of quiet pain—the particular ache of two people who care for each other but have ceased, somewhere along the way, to be building the same life. Leaving was my choice, and I made it with as much care as I could. But choice

does not insulate you from grief and guilt. The end of a long, shared life carries loss even when—perhaps especially when—you are the one who decided to go. Separation and divorce in a Catholic context come with the stigma of sin, of acting against God and the church community. Even though this was my choice, I still had to work through grief, guilt, and shame.

What followed, though, was remarkable. A new relationship began—one that, over two decades later, continues to be the great adventure of my life. In 2002, my partner and I packed everything we could carry and immigrated from Germany to Canada. We arrived as strangers to an enormous country, buzzing with the particular electricity of people who have chosen the unknown over the familiar. Everything was fresh, including the loss felt from moving away from family and friends. Everything was possible, including building new rela-

tions and visiting with friends and family.

By 2005, I had reinvented myself professionally, leaving project management consulting to become a professor of leadership studies—a field that gave me the privilege of thinking seriously, for nearly two decades, about what it means to lead a meaningful life. We had moved across the country, from the magnificent and breathtaking Slocan River Valley in the Kootenay Mountain Range in British Columbia to the charming and civilized capital area of New Brunswick. We left behind the adventures of the West and traded it for the communities and academic opportunities waiting in the East.

By 2008, a long and earnest spiritual journey had carried me from the Catholicism of the first 40 years of my life through Protestantism and Progressive Christianity to a secular humanism I now embrace with genuine conviction—a worldview grounded in compassion, reason, and human dignity, richer for having been so honestly earned. The philosopher in me found the searching exhilarating. The human in me found some of it genuinely painful.

Each step of that journey involved the loss of a community, a language, a set of rituals that had carried me. And these steps also freed me from constraining experiences and the hurt, guilt, and shame resulting from breaking or not living up to rigid religious rules and behavioural expectations that did not align with my need for freedom of choice, rational

thinking, and the unconditional love of and compassion for all human beings.

This is what I have come to understand: the pain and the exhilaration are not mutually exclusive opposites. They are two sides of the same experience. What psychologist Kenneth Doka calls *disenfranchised grief*—grief over self-chosen losses that society doesn't readily validate—is real, and it is worth naming. Every *decision*, after all, is etymologically a *cutting* (from the Latin *caedo*): something new is opened, and something else is genuinely left behind. Learning to honour those departures, rather than rushing past them toward the next horizon, turned out to be one of the most important skills a life in motion requires.

When the World Tilted—and What I Did With It

Even someone who thrives on change encounters moments that arrive not as chosen adventures but as pure rupture. For me, the years 2020 to 2023 were that kind of time—and they started with the traumatic experience of the death of my father during COVID.

The loss of my father in January 2021 was not a transition I chose or could prepare for. COVID took him at a distance, in circumstances stripped of every ritual that ordinarily holds the dying and comforts the living. I could not travel. I could not be present. I could not hold his hand or sit beside him in those final days or gather with family in the shared physical space of grief. What I received instead was a phone call and then silence.

That absence—the inability to do the one thing a son should be able to do—left a mark that time has softened but not erased. The loneliness—the inability of my father to die within the community of family and friends—created an almost painful yearning to do better. I found myself writing and thinking more seriously than ever about how we age, how we die, and how we ensure that we and others go through those experiences with as much human dignity and with as many meaningful choices as possible. Most importantly, I started to help build communities that can hold people through both, aging and dying. Loss, I was learning again, has a way of identifying your next work.

Retirement arrived across the same compressed window—officially on March 1, 2023, after several years of preparation. I had been an academic for close to two decades, and I won't pretend that leaving was simple. Academic identity runs unusually deep: it is not merely what you do but how you think, who you are, and where you belong. Relinquishing that was genuinely disorienting, in the way that all significant losses are—even chosen ones and ones that you thought you had prepared for. But I had learned, by then, to sit with that disorientation rather than flee it, and to ask not



Photos by Thomas Mengel



“what am I losing?” but “what am I feeling?,” “what do I make of this?,” and “what does this make possible?”

And then—Newfoundland.

In June 2022, my partner and I relocated to Pouch Cove, on the Avalon Peninsula: a landscape of rugged, salt-washed, improbable beauty that felt, from the first day, like somewhere a person could genuinely become and be home.

A new province. A new community. A newfound land—in every sense. The latest and, so far, most surprising chapter of all.

The Answer That Was Always Community

Here is what I know after the recent 25 years of reinvention: the most transformative force in a human life is not solitary resolve. It is being in and building community.

Community was what drew us to Newfoundland in the first place. A cohousing project developing near Portugal Cove–St. Philips had caught our attention—the prospect of intentional, cooperative, communal living was exactly the kind of leap we recognised as our own. We left New Brunswick, our home for 17 years, with genuine excitement and leapt with both feet into the leadership team of what would become the Killick Ecovillage Co-op. The timeline stretched beyond what we wanted to wait for, and we eventually settled in Pouch Cove instead—but that “detour” turned out to be anything but.

In Pouch Cove and across the Avalon Peninsula, I found my community in the fullest sense. My wife and I cofounded the Killick Coast North Seniors Co-operative; I helped develop the Sunrise Funeral Co-op, joined the Social Justice Co-op, and became involved in the NL Federation of Co-operatives. Each of these organisations is animated by the same conviction: that people, acting together with compassion, care, and shared purpose, can build something better than any of them could alone. Working alongside people who share that conviction has become, frankly, one of the great joys of my life.

I also began volunteering with the Nav-CARE (Navigation: Connecting, Advocating, Resourcing, Engaging) program through Newfoundland and Labrador Health Services—accompanying people through rehabilitation, geriatric services, and palliative care. Sitting with others at the edges of life, being genuinely useful in moments that matter enormously, has given me a particular sense of purpose I had not felt so vividly since my volunteer work with a crisis line 40 years earlier. It is extraordinary what becomes possible when you simply show up and offer your presence.

What these communities give me cannot be reduced to support or belonging,

though they offer both. What they give me is *aliveness*—the vitality that comes from being needed, from building things that didn’t exist before you arrived, from being known not as a résumé but as a person. Research on flourishing in later life points consistently to purposeful engagement and social connection as the core ingredients. I concur.

Writing as a Way of Making Meaning

Alongside the community work, I write. Writing, creatively, professionally, and academically, has been an important component of my meaning-making since high school. More creative writing has been at the core of my retirement plans. And writing, too, has become a form of community. In my journal, in my various publications, and in collaboration with others I have been tracing the arc of a life that, despite its ups and downs, has taken so many unexpected turns it can only be described as an upward spiral.

Viktor Frankl, whose work on meaning-centred psychology has shaped my thinking for decades, argued that suffering ceases to be suffering when it finds meaning. I would add that meaning-making is both relational and intentional. It happens when you tell your story to someone willing to hear it—and in doing so, discover what you think. It happens when you orient your actions toward the values that matter most to you. And it

happens, reliably, when you choose to frame your life not as a sequence of losses and recoveries but as an expanding conversation with the world.

Writing has been, for me, that conversation made visible. Each book, each essay, each blog post is a way of saying: this happened, and here is what I made of it. Not a lament. A report from the frontier.

The Chaplain I Didn't Know I Was Becoming

In August 2025, I began training as a humanist chaplain with Humanist Canada—and when I tell people this, some immediately respond: “Of course you did.”

It makes a certain perfect sense. Someone who holds graduate degrees in theology and the arts and sciences; who has traveled sincerely through four spiritual traditions and arrived at a secular humanism grounded in compassion and reason; who lived through his own losses and who has spent years accompanying people through suffering and hope; who has spent a career thinking about meaning and leadership—that person is perhaps unusually well prepared to offer spiritual care without the scaffolding of a specific theology. After my accreditation in August 2026, I will offer that care, providing existential presence, through Newfoundland and Labrador Health Services, their Nav-CARE program, and the community outreach program of the interfaith Pastoral Care team.

What I bring is not certainty about why we suffer or what lies beyond death. What I bring is genuine compassion, backed by the loving communities I am part of, and insatiable curiosity about what it means to live well—and the hard-won conviction, drawn from a life of many chapters, that every person's story, however complicated, however full of detours, contains something worth honouring.

What 25 Years of Jumping Has Taught Me

If I could offer four things I've learned from a life of honest reinvention, they would be these:

- The jump and the grief belong together. Every decision to move forward also closes a door, and what lies behind that door deserves acknowledgment before you turn away. It is not weakness to grieve a life you chose to leave. It is the precondition for fully inhabiting the life you are moving toward.

- Identity is not a possession to be protected but a capacity to be developed. You are not less yourself for having suffered losses and changed profoundly. You are, if anything, more. Getting there is not a straight line. It entails setbacks, grief, and wounds that often, but not always, heal.

- Healing and growth are not private projects. They happen in community—in the act of showing up for others while they show up for you. The co-ops, the volunteer programmes, the conversations over coffee: these are not the support structure for a meaningful life. They are the meaningful life.

- The next chapter is probably the most interesting one. Not as a performance of optimism, but as a pattern I have observed, in my own life, reliably. The willingness to jump—to sit with the dizziness of freedom rather than retreat from it—has never, not once, led somewhere smaller than where I started.

The communities waiting to receive us—the co-ops, the volunteer programs, the palliative care wards, the writing groups, the living rooms where people gather to build something together—they are not consolation prizes for a life that didn't go as planned. They are meaningful opportunities. They may become part of our lives.

Let's jump. 🐦

Thomas Mengel is a retired professor of leadership studies, cooperative community developer, and humanist chaplain based in Pouch Cove, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. His writings can be found at thomasmengel.com. He has published three essays about cooperative community development in previous issues of COMMUNITIES (two in #206, Spring 2025, and one in #210, Spring 2026).



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—Patch Adams, M.D., author and founder of the
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—Shen Pauley, reader and author, Barre, Massachusetts

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