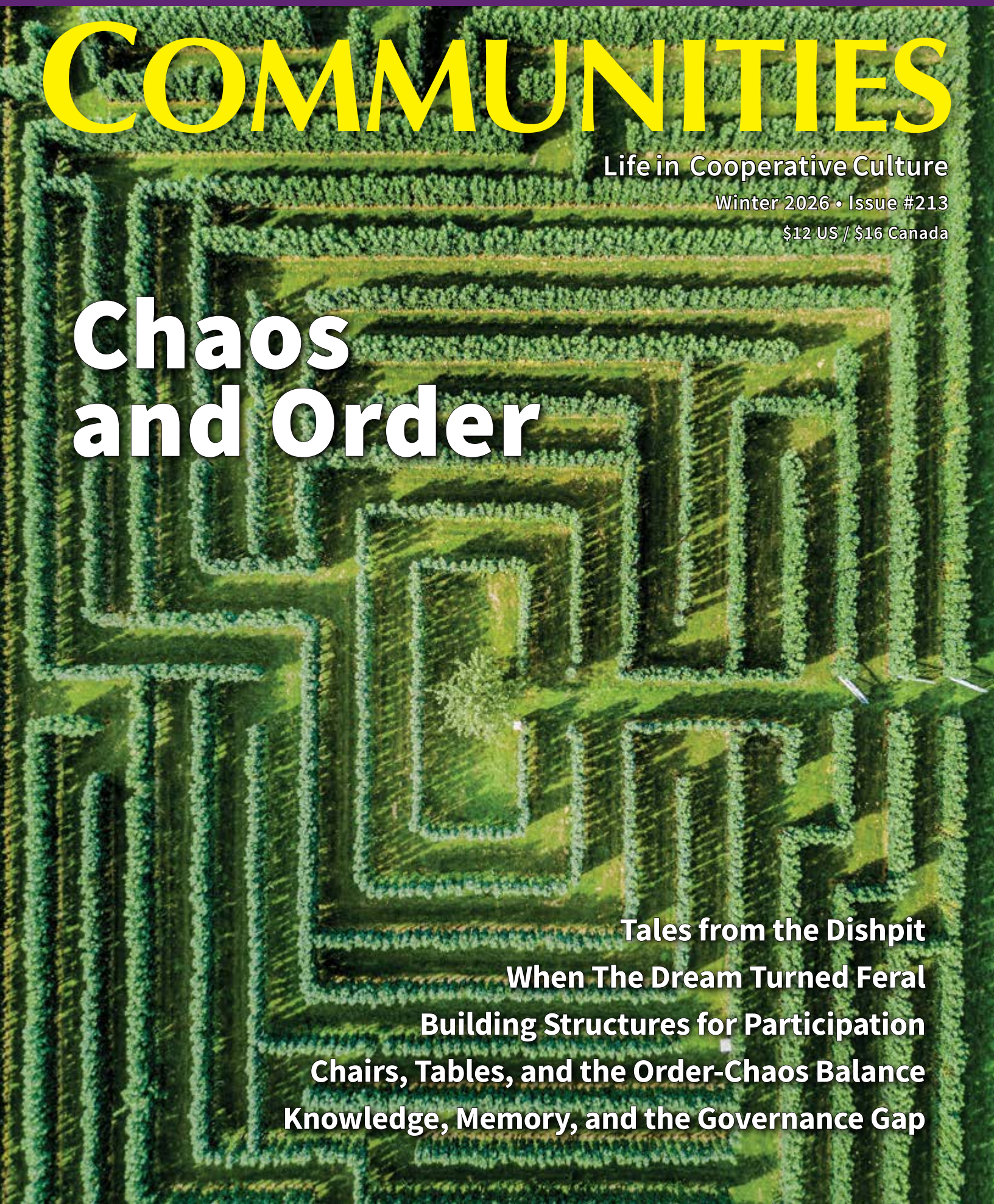
Consensus vs. Sociocracy? • Revisiting Zendik Farm

Communities

Life in Cooperative Culture
Winter 2026 • Issue #213
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Chaos and Order

Tales from the Dishpit
When The Dream Turned Feral
Building Structures for Participation
Chairs, Tables, and the Order-Chaos Balance
Knowledge, Memory, and the Governance Gap

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Issue #213
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47 **Revisiting a Communal Crucible: *Surviving Zendik Farm***
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50 **Review: *The Key Is in the Breastbone: A Creative Coming of Age***
Chris Roth
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Digital-Only
(see gen-us.net/FEC and gen-us.net/eco-obsessed):

62 **The FEC at 50: Communal Economics, Childcare, Networking, and the IRS**
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My suggestion to the Federation communities is to take advantage of the IRS threat and begin to use religion, in addition to governance and economics, as means for building gender-partnership and human-and-nature partnership culture.

66 **The Beauty of Disorder: Confessions of an Eco-Obsessed Mother**
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Collectively we can move beyond what we think we know. We plant realistic seeds of change (the permaculture chaos of natural order), not fabricate fixed solutions (modernity's order).

ON THE COVER



Order and Chaos are never far apart. Per Wikipedia: "In Greek mythology, the Labyrinth...is an elaborate, confusing structure designed and built by the mythological artificer Daedalus...to hold the Minotaur, the monster eventually killed by the hero Theseus. Daedalus had so cunningly made the Labyrinth that he could barely escape it after he built it." Here, gardeners have replaced the Minotaur with a central tree, and installed three swinging white gates to assure easy exit in a pinch. Photo from Adobe Stock.

Communities
Life in Cooperative Culture

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Some Food for Thought (if Bearly)

Greetings!

I just finished reading a book I think your current communitarians and ex-communitarians might really enjoy: *A Libertarian Walks into a Bear: The Utopian Plot to Liberate an American Town (And Some Bears)*, by Matthew Hongoltz-Hetling, published in 2020. It is based on a true story where a bunch of Libertarians move to Grafton, a small town in New Hampshire, with the goal of turning the whole town into a Libertarian, utopian enclave (population: 1200).

Their plan, known as the Free Town Project, aimed to eliminate public funding for services like the fire department, library, and schoolhouse, and to pay as little in taxes as possible.

Many of the residents there lived a radical existence. Some built a communal tent city to live off the grid, ignored hunting laws, and improperly disposed of food, which attracted the local bear population.

The author uses a humorous/tongue-in-cheek dialogue to tell the story.

I saw a lot of parallels between their goals of building an alternative, Libertarian society and what we were trying to do at Dandelion Community. (I was a member at Dandelion, located in Enterprise, Ontario, Canada, from 1977-1983.)

Here is the ironic twist which I think anyone interested in communal life might find interesting. In the chapter called "The Hidden Hitchhiker," the author talks about a parasite called *Toxoplasma gondii*, that 11 percent of the US population has. (Pregnant women are tested for it.) *T. gondii* affects the brain, particularly the dopamine levels where it makes people who have it act dumbass, or take more risks, like driving while drunk. (It apparently gets transmitted through cat feces and bears.) The author speculates that maybe some/most of the Libertarians had this parasite!

My first reaction was, "This guy is making this stuff UP!" But, lo and behold, I went to Wikipedia and there are THIRTY PAGES about it.

That got me thinking/wondering if maybe I WAS INFECTED—and maybe others who joined the communal movement were infected with this parasite as well!

And, maybe that was part of the reason we joined our various communities?

Here is the last paragraph of that chapter: "Sapolsky has become a standard-bearer for a theory that free will is more or less something people have made up rather than face the far less satisfying reality that most of our decisions are driven by culture, chemical processes within the brain, bacteria in the gut, and not least parasites."

In community,

Richie Graham
Burlington, Vermont

2027 Communal Studies Association Conference: Call for Papers and Articles for Communities #218

Communities editor Chris Roth, frequent contributor Kara Huntermoon, and scholar Susanna Pyatt are Program Chairs for the **Annual Conference** of the **Communal Studies Association** to be held **October 7-9, 2027** at **Lost Valley Education Center/Meadowsong Ecovillage**, Dexter, Oregon. Please check out the Call for Papers, highlighting the theme

Communities as Incubators and Catalysts of Social Change

—which will also serve as the theme for Communities #218, Spring 2028 (see **gen-us.net/CFP**). The CSA Conference proposal submission deadline is May 21, 2027, with Communities article proposals encouraged by late September 2027, and final article submissions requested by late November 2027. Please consider combining your efforts by attending the conference, presenting a paper, panel discussion, or interactive session, and submitting an article as well! (See also **gen-us.net/CSA2027**.)

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.

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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.

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What is an "Intentional Community"?

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



What if the next chapter of your life wasn't about having more space, more possessions, or more responsibilities? What if it was about having more time, more connection, and more opportunities to enjoy what truly matters?

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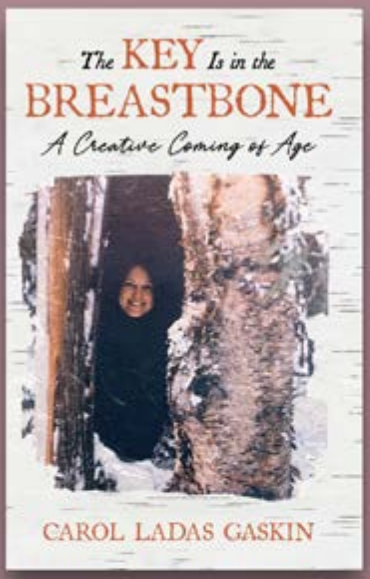
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The Key Is in the Breastbone: A Creative Coming of Age invites readers into the raw, resilient heart of Carol Ladas Gaskin's extraordinary life—an adventure that traces the true spirit of the 1960s' counterculture far beyond its iconic moments.

At the height of historical cultural upheaval in 1968, Carol, her young daughter, and a small group of close friends headed to the wilderness of British Columbia, determined to forge a life of purpose and meaning far removed from mainstream society. Their experiment in intentional community was no easy escape; it was a daily test of courage, ingenuity, and endurance.

Available for purchase online or wherever books are sold.

carolladasgaskin.com



Chris Roth

More Chaos Ahead

I found our current theme especially resonant with my own experience—in intentional community, in life in general, and even in producing Communities, where "Chaos" and "Order," always in dynamic, interdependent tension, both play essential roles in each issue's evolution from uncertain nothingness to curated, page-numbered somethingness (a.k.a. meticulously ordered chaos). One cannot love the process of magazine-making, artistic creation, community, or perhaps anything else in life without, in some way, also loving both of these elemental forces.

I'm grateful to all the authors who took the time to share stories and perspectives arising from their own lives within community; their insights and lessons apply far beyond the particular situations they describe. Prominent patterns and issues arose across the range of submissions, most reminding me of experiences that I and/or people I know have had, with wisdom that could make many familiar challenges more manageable.

While perennially relevant, the theme itself might have stayed on the back burner without a perception of the overwhelming, unsettling, destructive chaos that seems to be at the heart of the "order" we are living in right now—including at the very highest levels of government. In this light, intentional communities are an attempt—a valiant, idealistic, and also often very practical, savvy attempt—to bring workable, meaningful order to an increasingly chaotic world. At the same time, since this chaos is presenting itself as the new (and supposedly old) "order," as a dominating status quo that would marginalize anyone who dares to question it, intentional communities are also a way to defy and disrupt it, tap into the creative chaos that can offer paths out of our current predicaments.

Hopefully what follows will offer support for efforts to introduce order to chaos, and chaos to order, in ways that help us toward a more viable, cooperative future. The process can be just as rewarding as the product in this pursuit—and will need to be; the "goal" may take several additional generations' lifetimes to reach. In the meantime, there is clearly more chaos ahead of us.

Thanks again for reading, and to all those who contributed!

• • •

Notice: If your community is receiving a complimentary **Benefactor-Supported Subscription**, it will **not** automatically renew. **To request an extension** of that complimentary subscription, please **email** us at *editor@gen-us.net* or **write** us asap at 330 Morgan St., Oberlin, OH 44074. We hope you choose to stay with us!

Also: **Printing and mailing costs** have risen approximately **30 percent** (!) since we last changed our subscription prices, seven years ago. To offset a very small amount of that rise, while still attempting to keep our lowest-priced subscription levels accessible to all, **we are raising our yearly subscription prices by $2 for Basic, $5 for Supporter, and $10 for Sustainer.** We especially appreciate subscriptions at the **Supporter** and **Sustainer** levels, which more accurately reflect actual costs. However you're able to support us, thank you!

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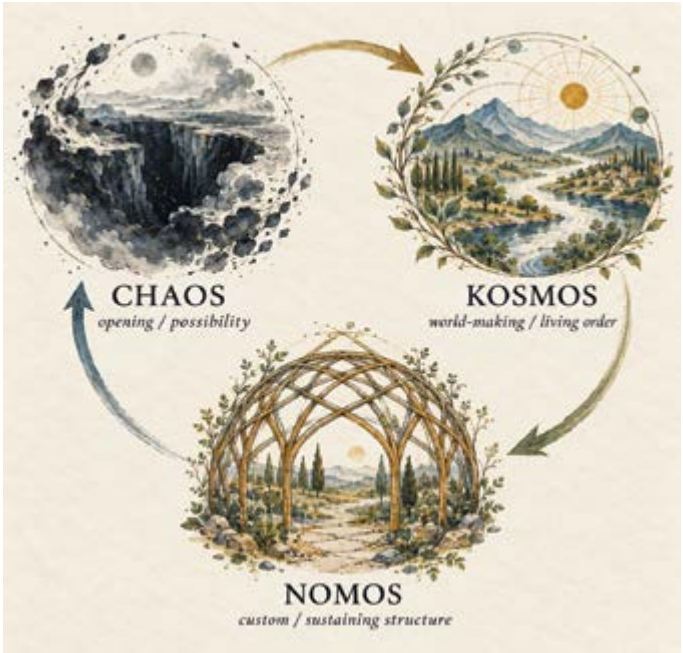
Chaos–Kosmos–Nomos: What Keeps a Community Alive?

By Kristina Jansen

I am sitting in my office in my new house in Mérida, Yucatán, as I write this article. It is thundering outside, sheets of rain cascading around the house, drenching the grass and the paths beyond the wraparound portico that connects my makeshift office with the main house, where our kitchen and family room are. The loud weather echoes my inner struggle to name the chaos of my life as I try to arrange something new after my former life in California. My husband, a Mexican national who had lived and built a successful life in the United States for more than 30 years despite his undocumented status, had come to believe it was no longer safe for him to remain. As immigration enforcement intensified, he returned to Mexico, and a few months later I followed. I feel exiled —a comfortable, partly self-chosen exile, for sure—but separated from my country, my familiar places, and my people—the people I have spent most of my life with.

• • •

I was five years old when my parents brought me to live in the central house of the nascent community I call Orinda in my writing for Communities. On a bright day in 1975, my child-sized dresser and my stuffed elephant, Ellie, came with me, and we were nestled into a sleeping spot in the corner of Pam's bedroom. Pam was my new designated "practical parent." She was the disabled mother of one of my agemates, but she was a relative stranger to me. By then, my parents had asked me to call them by their first names instead of "Mommy" or "Daddy," reinforcing the idea that each of us was a separate individual rather than a part of a privileged family unit. When I moved into Pam's room, they also stopped being my main caregivers. Although they remained present in the wider community, regular interactions with them became increasingly rare.



The experiment my parents and their friends were embarking upon would change all of our lives in ways we could not have predicted. The idea of practical parents grew from an observation: children seemed to act up more dramatically with their own parents than with other adults. Perhaps, the group reasoned, the parent-child bond had been overvalued. Children were understood as full human beings, with agency, feelings, and opinions that deserved respect. But small children still needed care. If biological parents—especially mothers—were hovering, emotionally hungry, and overinvolved, perhaps children would do better with more benign neglect. The adults decided to break the natal bond by caring for one another's young children instead of their own. As the experiment evolved, other adults also took an active role, and most of us were raised primarily by unrelated adults within a communally organized "kids program."

Parenting was not the only aspect of social organization that was being challenged in the early days of the Orinda community. Couple bonds were constantly being questioned, personal routines were often under discussion, private property was encouraged to be shared, and privacy was not highly valued. Everything was up for discussion, and nothing was off limits to challenge.

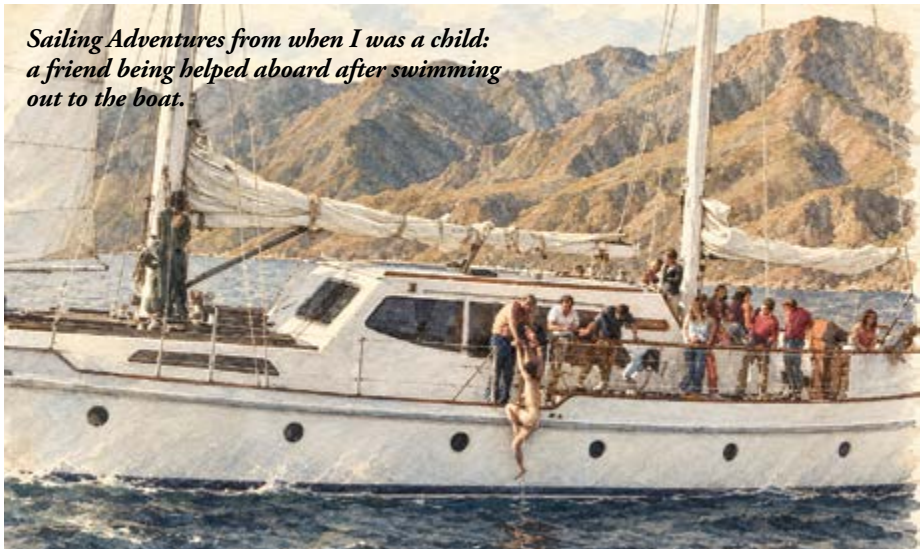
To the adults, this was liberation: an opening in which family, marriage, authority, and ownership could all be rearranged. To the five-year-old living inside their experiment, it felt like chaos.

Looking back to its Greek origins, ***chaos*** did not originally mean mere mess or confusion. It named a gap, a chasm, an unformed opening. Orinda's original members entered that opening deliberately. They believed the ordinary arrangements of American life—marriage, the nuclear family, private property, conventional work, fixed authority—were not inevitable. They could be dismantled, examined, and built anew.

That opening created genuine possibility. It also removed structures that had provided predictability, particularly for the group's children, who had not chosen to enter it. I was given unusual freedom and treated, in some ways, like a tiny adult. I learned early how to flow, how to bend, how to pay attention and fit myself into whatever was going on around me. I still value the adaptability I learned. I also recognize that my learned flexibility was a survival strategy. My chaotic childhood was exciting, and it taught me that life could be arranged in



Ellie the Elephant and my dresser in Pam's Room.



Sailing Adventures from when I was a child: a friend being helped aboard after swimming out to the boat.

Images by Kristina Jansen

ways that most people never imagined. I am grateful for that. It also took me a long time to learn to trust enough to lean into deep relationships.

• • •

Chaos alone is never enough to make a successful community. The Greek ***kosmos*** means order or arrangement—an ordered world, even an arrangement with beauty. In the intentional community movement, I think this renewed kosmos is what many of us seek: a new social arrangement that answers our longing for more connection, fairer systems, or a more meaningful existence.

Over time, the Orinda community made such a world. Roughly 70 people collectively bought an apartment complex and created a life partially set apart from the surrounding suburbs. New love stories evolved into new couples, and even marriages. An entrepreneurial spirit mixed with the fun of shared projects, and new businesses were formed—and succeeded beyond anyone's early expectations. Generosity, curiosity, and the desire to experience life together became the lifeblood of this new kosmos. So did an emphasis on identifying and changing our negative internal patterns. The childhood interventions were understood as an attempt to break these internal patterns before they were even formed. People's living arrangements were always under review, and re-adjusted frequently to keep things more "alive." The energy needed to flow, never stagnate. To further exemplify this ethos of movement, we took months-long camping, boating, sailing, and international trips. In second grade and third grade, I missed more school days than I attended. When I was 14, I dropped out of school completely, as did many of my age peers. The cohort just older than mine had done the same. Stability and routine were not among our highest values.

Yet all this apparent disorder required extraordinary organization. I already mentioned the success in business. But our extensive trips provide an even clearer example. Campsites had to be built and dismantled. Dozens of people had to be fed. Sleeping places, transportation, equipment, boats, and children had to be coordinated, maintained, and paid for. People with the aptitude for particular tasks assumed responsibility. We learned to move together almost choreographically.

This was kosmos: not bureaucracy, but the exhilarating discovery that another arrangement could work. The community offered us a world rich in adventure, shared labor, intimacy, and belonging. It expanded the possible. It also developed an order of its own.

• • •

That brings us to ***nomos:*** law, custom, convention. Successful arrangements are repeated. Repetition becomes custom; custom becomes expectation; expectation becomes rule. Some rules are written, but many remain invisible until someone violates them. Original members retain authority because they remember why things are done as they are. Children and newcomers inherit an order they did not help create.

When I had my own child, I was still deeply invested in the ideas I had internalized growing up: that too much parental attachment could be damaging to a child. As an effectively "unmothered" person, I had little idea about how to be one for my own child. When my son was less than two years old, I followed the suggestions of many friends in the community, and took several steps back from raising him. At the same time, I became more involved with other children in the community, with whom I did not have the same crisis of confidence. I was fine taking care of other people's children, but psychologically unequipped to sweat it out with my own. For a supposedly psychologically sophisticated community, we really didn't have any understanding about how attachment works.

This remained the norm for many years. Eventually, newer members who had not grown up within the community began to question it. So did some of the children who had—and who felt in their bodies the wrongness of breaking the parent-child bond so completely. They pushed back against an arrangement the rest of us had learned to accept as normal.

I am grateful that this has changed, and profoundly grateful for the relationship my son and I have rebuilt. He's 20 now and off at college, but he's one of my favorite people in the world, and I am so curious to see what he decides to do with his life.

• • •

When I was 20, I was deeply invested in the persistence of the community I had grown up in, and in the radical possibilities of the world we had built together, even though I did not really plan to live there as an adult. I was also away at college then, and in the midst of trying to decide what I'd do with my own life. In my final undergraduate year, I wrote a senior thesis which carried the weighty title *Experiments in Utopia: Survival Beyond the First Generation.* Drawing on Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*, I examined the tension between the utopian impulse, which disrupts an existing reality by insisting that another world is possible, and the ideological impulse, which preserves and legitimizes the social order that emerges. An intentional community must institutionalize at least some of its practices if it is to own property, care for people, resolve conflict, and survive its founders. My question was: How can enough utopian magic be carried into the rigidifying rules that keep a community going so that it remains alive?

It was a good question for a 22-year-old who had grown up inside the experiment. At 56, I am no longer certain it was the right one.

The question assumed that the founding magic was what needed to be preserved. But founding periods have shadows as well as light. Charisma can conceal unequal power. Informality can make accountability difficult. Blurred boundaries may feel liberating to the adults with the greatest freedom while feeling unsafe to children, whose dependence does not disappear simply because adults have reconceived it. A group can reject conventional rules while enforcing its own rules without naming them as such. The magic of a founding generation can become its mythology—and mythology can make harm difficult to see.

Nomos, then, deserves a defense. Rules can protect people. Clear processes can make power visible. Institutional memory can prevent a community from repeating old harm. Predictability can create the security from which experimentation becomes possible. The problem is not that a living community acquires an order. It is that it may begin to treat its particular order as sacred.

My question now is less romantic and perhaps more useful: How can a community create enough order to hold people without losing the ability to examine—and remake—that order? The challenge is not to preserve the founders' magic. It is to keep the community capable of generating new life when their magic is no longer sufficient.

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In the 50 years after I moved into Pam's room, some of the structures our community set out to dismantle have returned. Family relationships, once regarded with suspicion, have reasserted themselves. As the founders age, their biological children often become their caregivers—including some of us whose childhood needs were subordinated to the original experiment. Siblings provide continuity. At the same time, decades of communal life have created real found-family bonds. These relationships overlap, and together they hold many people securely.

But the current order has exclusions of its own. Long-time single members, widowed members, only children, and those without family nearby may be held more precariously. A community that once imagined it could replace family may now depend heavily upon family without fully acknowledging the change. No arrangement distributes care, responsibility, and belonging perfectly.

My mother relinquished conventional mothering when I was five. Decades later, as Alzheimer's dismantled her independence, I became her caretaker and power of attorney. Community friends, my sister, my husband's caregiving family, and finally professional memory care each became part of the structure holding her. Community did not replace family. Family did not replace community. Each carried part of the burden, and neither could carry all of it.

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Now I have left California and the community that formed and sustained me. I left for good reasons, but it was a huge leap into the unknown. I followed my husband to Mexico, but neither of us was going home. We deliberately chose a city where neither of us had family, friends, or an established community, and we are building a life here together from the ground up. At the same time, the political changes that made his life in the United States untenable have also disrupted the renewable energy industry in which I built my career, adding professional uncertainty to the personal upheaval of our move. The structures of home, work, caregiving, and professional identity that organized my life have broken apart. I am again in chaos—not only turmoil, but the gap between one organized life and whatever comes next.

Here in Mérida, my husband and I are beginning another small kosmos through home, friendship, neighborhood, habit, and mutual dependence. Its nomos has not yet hardened. Perhaps that is why the question feels alive again.

Communities do not move once from chaos into order and remain there. To stay alive, they must keep moving among chaos, kosmos, and nomos: opening possibility, making a world, building structures to sustain it, and opening those structures again when they cease to serve the life inside them.

Outside my window, the kiskadees are building their nests. The iguanas are eating our bananas. Thunder is still rolling across the sky. I am trying to remain in this unformed interval long enough to hear what kind of order wants to emerge. What I seek is not the preservation of an old utopia, but the beginning of another living world.

Kristina Jansen grew up in an intentional community in California and has spent much of her life thinking about how people build and sustain alternative ways of living together. She holds a master's degree in cultural anthropology and has worked across renewable energy, climate advocacy, writing, and publishing. A long-time contributor to Communities*, she is currently revisiting questions she first explored in her undergraduate thesis on the survival of intentional communities beyond their founding generations. She now lives with her husband outside Mérida, Yucatán, where she is writing about community, belonging, transition, and the unexpected possibilities that emerge when an established life comes apart.*



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FOUNDATION FOR INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

Holding What Matters, Without Closing What's Possible

By Laura van Wijngaarden

An Opening for Order

I never expected a cooking schedule to feel like an act of courage.

At Liminal Village, our intentional community project in central Italy, the culture of freedom and emergence meant that many forms of structure were seen as controlling.

In the fall of 2023, a new member came to Liminal Village after leaving a highly organized role at a global technology company. He quickly saw what I had been trying to articulate for some time: our community needed more structure. His support gave me the courage to act.

For about a week, he and I walked back and forth across the courtyard, with my newborn drifting to sleep against my chest, planning the next day. We envisioned a shared starting time, clearer coordination, and a cooking schedule. I was afraid that even these "ordinary" agreements might be experienced as constraining freedom. I also felt deeply relieved that someone else was willing to help bring more order into the community.

In my article for the previous issue of Communities (#212, Trauma and Healing), I wrote about the overwhelm I was in during that time. That period became a turning point in my evolving relationship with order: from barely being able to voice the need for it, through attempts to create it from fear and overwhelm, toward a more grounded way of holding structure.

From Apollonian Form to Dionysian Escapism

Before cofounding Liminal Village, I trained and worked as a medical doctor in the Netherlands. Medicine is a highly ordered world of protocols, hierarchy, documentation, precision, and clear responsibility. Order often makes safety possible, but it can also become suffocating.



Part of the core team of Liminal Village meeting together in the spring of 2026.

Alex Lion Yes!

Outside my work, I was increasingly drawn toward the opposite, Dionysian pole—the realm of spontaneity, instinct, intensity, and surrender. On weekends and holidays, I sought escape through partying and adventurous travel as a counterforce to the Apollonian order of medical life. I began longing for a life in which spontaneity and aliveness were not confined to weekends, but could become part of everyday living.

Liminal Village

Liminal Village began as an experiment in emergence, self-organization, decentralization, and non-coercion. These principles were shaped primarily by the vision of my husband and cofounder, Roberto. Our home on a three-hectare property, with three houses, opened to a rotating flow of people exploring communal living, regenerative projects, technology, and new economic forms.

The underlying premise was that people could organize themselves through intrinsic motivation and internal agency, with structure emerging from the needs of the community, rather than being imposed through hierarchy. Living the experiment gradually showed me that this kind of freedom depends on trust built through responsibility, clear communication, honored agreements, and awareness of our impact on the whole community.

Initially, part of me experienced the freedom of Liminal Village, together with its deeper human connection and closeness to nature, as profoundly liberating. At the same time, I was carrying much of the invisible labor holding our home and community together. I was so accustomed to serving others that it took me years to realize how much I had slipped into the role of the maid. Looking back, some of that sense of freedom was also a form of denial: I was attracted to the openness without fully acknowl-

edging its cost to me. Too much order had made me long for freedom; too little order eventually became more than I could sustainably hold.

Who Is Making Dinner?

The consequences of having so little agreed structure in our community project appeared in ordinary life. Without dependable starting times, mornings could melt away in waiting, coordinating, or emotional processing, while the daily community rhythm drifted later into the night.

Food made the consequences particularly visible. Without clear responsibility for cooking, dinner could happen very late because no one had taken ownership. Shopping and menu planning were improvised, consuming time, energy, and money. Failures of coordination accumulated, each creating another decision, interruption, or piece of invisible labor for someone else to absorb.

The unpredictability exposed a deeper contradiction. We spoke often about regeneration, but a regenerative culture also needs to regenerate the people living within it. We need enough rhythm for nourishment, rest, presence, care, and meaningful work—not constant interruption and improvisation. Children made the limits particularly visible, though adults were no less dependent on rhythms of care for their well-being and capacity to contribute.

Changing the World, Neglecting the House

The tension between what captures our attention and what needs care in the present has been part of Liminal Village since its founding. I have seen a pattern in which intellectual exploration—often led by men—takes up considerable space through conversations about regeneration, new systems, and changing the world. Meanwhile, the practical work of sustaining daily life receives less attention and falls more heavily on others, especially women.

This contradiction became more visible during one predominantly male, technology-oriented community experiment. Much of the group's energy went into abstract conversations and ambitious visions of changing humanity, while care for the household was often neglected. Two breastfeeding mothers gradually withdrew from the group because the environment did not feel particularly nourishing or supportive.



Three breastfeeding mothers connecting during a lunation, with Laura in the middle.

Roberto Valenti

One man repeatedly drew attention to the disorder in the household. He asked how we could aspire to improve humanity while struggling to care for our own home. His frustration became increasingly reactive, and he eventually became a lightning rod for broader tensions. He left before the agreed period had ended, as circumstances made staying increasingly difficult. His departure brought greater social ease among the men, but the breastfeeding mothers still did not feel sufficiently held or cared for. Looking back, I see the paradox: removing the person who kept signaling the disorder restored social harmony among the men, while the underlying disorder remained largely unchanged.

Who Hears the Signal First?

People have different thresholds for registering disorder. When left unheeded, the situation can become chaotic. Nervous systems and social conditioning both play a role; some people can live comfortably with ambiguity and mess much longer than others. Sensitive members can sometimes function as early warning systems. Their signals may come out imperfectly—as anger, blame, anxiety, or attempts to control—but the underlying information may still matter.

Instead of asking only, "Why is this person creating so much disruption?" we can also ask: "What might they be noticing that the rest of us are missing?" At Liminal Village, signals pointing toward a need for greater clarity, responsibility, and follow-through often met resistance. When structure itself is associated with control, both the signal and the response it calls for can be rejected. The challenge is distinguishing generative freedom from avoidant chaos.

When Chaos Feeds Compulsion

Another place I notice the effects of too little structure is in the patterns that shape how we use our time. Periods when Liminal Village slips back into more chaotic rhythms, especially during summer, make me aware of how easily stimulation-seeking habits gain ground.

Days become less organized, conversations continue late into the night, screens and other forms of stimulation take up more space, and it becomes easier to follow whatever feels compelling in the moment. At times I wonder whether, instead of being a regenerative hub, we inadvertently become a place that facilitates people's addictions



Constellation work exploring the patterns beneath the apparent chaos, with Laura pictured at the top right.

Anna Giunta



Courtesy of Laura van Wijngaarden

and compulsive habits.

Without enough conscious order, unconscious habits can begin organizing the day for us. Novelty and stimulation compete with maintenance, planning, focused work, and care for shared spaces. Shared rhythm can help us choose more consciously where we give our time and attention.

When the Pendulum Swung Back

Part of my own growth is learning how to introduce structure without letting fear and overwhelm push me toward control. About four years into the project, with support from a mentor, I began stepping out of my largely behind-the-scenes role and into more visible co-leadership with my husband.

A contradiction shaped my leadership: I felt responsible for the coherence of the community, but I was afraid to exercise authority. Lifelong patterns of people-pleasing and avoidance protected me from conflict and disapproval, but also shaped how I led.

When I began introducing more structure, it did not always come from a grounded place. My protective "parts" sometimes desperately wanted the disorder to stop. I was reacting not only to what was happening in the present, but also to trauma from the past. Even when the structure I was proposing was necessary, the way I introduced it could be colored by old wounds, carrying an urgency, resentment, or controlling energy that made it harder for others to receive.

When Care Turns into Control

When too little shared order leaves a few people carrying too much, the attempt to restore order can itself become reactive. I still see this at Liminal Village today, particularly among women in leadership. I think of this kind of reactivity as one expression of wounded "feminine" leadership (using "feminine" archetypally rather than as something exclusive to women). Under stress, capacities for attunement and care can distort into over-functioning, resentment, martyrdom, blame, and control.

A male community member recently described feeling repeatedly blamed by female coordinators and leaders, to the point that he felt whatever he did would not be enough. I recognized myself in his experience: I had blamed my own partner when overwhelmed by unequal household responsibility. The needs beneath my blame were real, but "take more responsibility" could be heard as "you are failing."

The person receiving feedback also needs to examine defensiveness, follow-through, and impacts they may not see. At the same time, frustrated feedback can activate shame and withdrawal, reinforcing the very imbalance that gave rise to the frustration.

When structural order is lacking—clear responsibilities, agreements, and accountability—we can end up trying to create order through pushing, blaming, rescuing, or controlling. Clearer structures can relieve some of this relational pressure, but they are not enough on their own. They depend on the maturity and capacity of the people inside them.

What Lies Beneath Chaos and Order

Recently, our family visited another community project in Italy, founded by a couple with a child, and I recognized a familiar polarity. The male founder leaned toward spontaneity and greater chaos; his partner toward order and stability. Her overwhelm mirrored my own, but while I had only contemplated leaving, she had actually left her husband and their project for a time.

Listening to this couple helped me question the polarity itself. I began to see that chaos and order may not really be equivalent opposites. A healthier tension may be between order and emergence: enough form to hold what matters, and enough openness for something new to arise. Under stress, both can move toward their extremes—order toward control, and emer-

gence toward chaos.

Different needs lie beneath each tendency: order can protect safety, continuity, and care, while emergence can protect freedom, possibility, and space for the new. The problem is not order or emergence themselves, but what happens when either becomes reactive.

Structure that Supports Life

For the past four years, I have been mentored by an elder with decades of experience in intentional communities and regenerative culture. We have been on a deep journey of supporting my internal work in the context of living in community. One result is that I have learned to bring more structure into my life and Liminal Village.

Managing time was one of my challenges. Some protective parts of me, shaped by past experiences of structure as controlling, resisted calendars and planning, fearing that commitments would cost me openness and autonomy. And, I was so accustomed to following and serving others that I struggled to look up and see further horizons.

My mentor created a "Map of the Time Landscape," based on the lunation rhythm we already used at Liminal Village. This organic, whole-systems representation of the lunations in the solar year helped me connect with time beyond the rectilinear form of conventional calendars. It gave structure to what I had previously held intuitively and helped me see the whole of what was happening in my life and community in a more organic and generative way.

I also learned to develop more intentional onboarding systems for our community. When we welcomed a German couple to Liminal Village with clearer orientation, they reorganized tool sheds and shared spaces, created art, and experienced their time with us as nourishing. Structure had not diminished their creativity or freedom; it helped create the conditions for both.

Gradually, I began experiencing structure not as something deadening or coercive, but as something alive and orienting—supporting connection, creativity, and meaningful contribution.

A Community in Transition

Liminal Village has been moving toward greater structure. Financially, we are shifting from an almost entirely gift-economy model toward clearer accounting and contributions. I still value the gift economy, but generosity needs a container: without clarity about needs and limits, what appears free can leave costs invisible or carried by others.

We are also moving toward clearer agreements in how we organize responsibility. We are working to make roles clearer, while more permanent and semi-permanent members are joining the core group.

Our relationship with people coming and going has been changing too. Arrivals are increasingly coordinated for particular days, and we are planning around upcoming lunations and looking further ahead. A booking system is in development, with less reliance on things somehow "organizing themselves" and more willingness to consciously create supportive structures.

Learning to Hold the Balance

My understanding of freedom has changed profoundly since we cofounded Liminal Village. I once associated freedom largely with the absence of external authority and constraint. I now see it more as a developmental capacity: the ability to take responsibility, coordinate with others, uphold agreements, exercise discernment, and care for what we create together. Without those capacities, removing external authority does not necessarily create freedom. Chaos can fill the vacuum, while responsibility shifts to whoever steps in to carry it.

Looking back at those walks across the courtyard with my baby sleeping against my chest, I understand my relief differently now. I was not simply longing for more schedules. I was beginning to discover that structure could support life rather than simply constrain it. I now think the sweet spot lies in enough structure to hold and protect what matters, while preserving enough openness for life to keep emerging. Liminal Village is still learning where that balance lies, and so am I.

Laura van Wijngaarden is a physician trained in anesthesiology and pain medicine, who is transitioning from a conventional medical framework toward a more holistic approach to health and care. She is cofounder of Liminal Village, a hub for regenerative culture, technology, and community-scale innovation, with her husband, Roberto Valenti, with whom she has two children, ages three and eight. Laura is also founder of Casa Selva, an emerging education and retreat space for inner development, regenerative stewardship, and connection with nature. Since 2022, she has been mentored by Jillian Hovey in relational and inner development work. To learn more: liminalvillage.com, casaselva.earth, laura@liminalvillage.com.



Jillian (right) sharing knowledge of the land with Laura (left) while they explore a nearby community.

Roberto Valenti

Chaos According to Whom? The Orders We Live Inside and Carry Within Us

By Jillian Hovey

Jillian Hovey



Osho Hall at Pachamama Ecovillage in Costa Rica, the centre of the community's collective practices.

"This is chaotic!" "We need some structure around here!" "She's such a control freak!" "Why are you making such a big deal out of it?" "Just go with the flow!"

Most of us have heard versions of these lines. We throw around "chaos" and "order" pretty easily, often with considerable judgment. How we experience them is subjective: what feels like delicious spontaneity to one person can feel like chaos to somebody else; what feels reassuringly organized to one person can feel constraining, deadening, or downright controlling to another. People can share the same situation and experience it very differently.

Intentional communities are especially revealing places to explore chaos and order because we deliberately experiment with how to organize shared life. We often come to community wanting to live differently from the systems we have known, but we do not necessarily agree about what should be organized, who should take responsibility, or what freedom should look like. Those differences can quickly become competing prescriptions for how to organize ourselves. When things feel chaotic, the answer can seem to be more order. When things feel rigid or controlling, the answer can seem to be more freedom or flow.

So what do we actually mean by chaos and order? Chaos according to whom and relative to what? What do these terms help us see, or prevent us from seeing, about the life we are creating together?

What Order Is Actually Operating?

About a dozen years ago, I facilitated a social permaculture workshop at a community founded around inner-development practices. I introduced the layers of a forest as a way of exploring social organization. From top to ground, the layers are canopy trees, understory trees, shrubs, herbs, and groundcovers. Climbing and ground-running vines weave through and across them. Underground are roots and tubers, with mycelial networks running throughout the soil profile. Each layer occupies a different niche, and together they create a dynamic, mutually supportive living system.

I invited people to imagine their own community through this model and asked where they saw themselves within its ecology. There was some vulnerability in sharing how we saw ourselves in community. At the time, mycelium was a hot concept in alternative-community circles. It offered an appealing image of connection, symbiosis, and support beneath the visible life of the forest. Unsurprisingly, quite a few people located themselves as mycelium. One founding member, whom most of the other participants experienced as a significant canopy tree with a large presence in the community, resisted seeing themselves in the canopy. The discrepancy exposed something important: how we experience our own place in a community may not match how others experience us within it.

Community has architecture whether or not we draw it in rectangles on an organizational chart. The order already operating includes patterns of roles and relationships, norms and expectations, authority and boundaries, habits and flows. These patterns channel what happens and make some actions more likely than others. Some are explicit. Much of a community's order is tacit, inherited, cultural, or simply taken for granted. Order tells us there is organization. It does not yet tell us whether that organization serves life well.

Where Order Comes From

We do not arrive in intentional community unordered. We arrive already shaped by patterns learned in families, cultures, institutions, and communities. We may consciously reject some, aspire to others, and reproduce still others without realizing it. A community's order comes not only from bylaws, decision processes, or organizational charts, but from what people bring with them, what they create together, and the wider systems in which they live. The orders we create are not always the orders we recognize.

In 2014, I was living and working at Pachamama, an ecovillage

in Costa Rica. In the office one day, I was surprised to see one of the sacred ceremony leaders doing administrative work at a computer. I spoke to her about it, and her response stayed with me. She told me that one of the beauties of Pachamama was that you could have the "wrong" person in a job and it still worked. The fit between one person and one role was only part of how the community held together. Pachamama had strong coherence. It was guru-led, and its core community had already bonded as a tribe before settling there. We can get hung up on finding the "right" person for a role, but role fit is only one way a community holds together. Different forms of order can reinforce, compensate for, or sometimes contradict one another.

Coherence is the degree to which the parts of a system hang together well enough for the whole to function. It is not the same as neatness, sameness, or goodness. A tightly controlled system can be coherent around something harmful, while a looser system can function through shared culture, trust, and tacit coordination. Visible order is not the same as coherence. If appearances alone do not tell us whether a system is functioning, we need to get clearer about what we mean by chaos.

What Do We Mean by Chaos?

Chaos is not the same thing as messiness or unpredictability. Chaos can be patterned, familiar, and even predictable. A community can repeatedly miss commitments, scramble at the last minute, rely on somebody to rescue the situation, settle down for a while, and then begin the cycle again. That repeating cycle is itself a form of order, a patterned way of organizing around the same problem. Predictability does not make the experience any less chaotic.

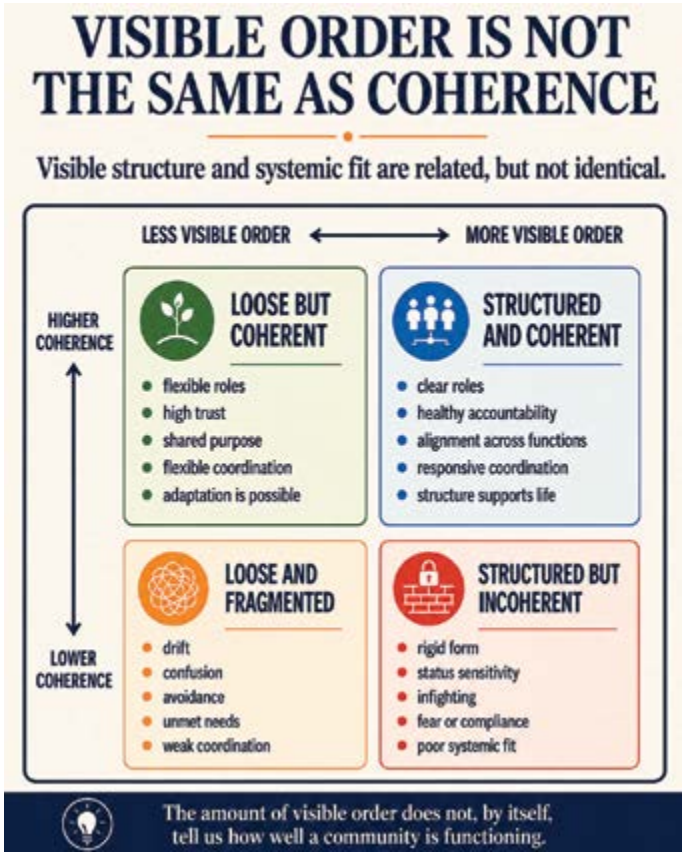
People can experience the same pattern differently depending on where they stand within it. Someone who has lived inside it for years may barely notice what strikes a newcomer as chaotic. Someone who regularly deals with the consequences may experience it very differently from someone relatively insulated from them. "Chaos according to whom?" keeps turning out to matter.

Competing perceptions only take us so far. Another clue is friction within the system. Friction arises when needs, expectations, rhythms, capacities, or circumstances do not fit together well. Some friction is inevitable and informative; some can be anticipated or reduced, and some simply wears people and systems down. A recurring mismatch can lead to a better practice, or it can be patched over so the same pattern continues. What matters is what the system does with it.

When friction keeps accumulating without being worked with or learned from, its effects can spread. Needs go unmet, coordination breaks down, compensations multiply, and impacts accumulate elsewhere. More and more attention may go into managing those impacts, leaving less for addressing what keeps generating them. A situation can become increasingly difficult to navigate even while its patterns remain painfully familiar. What appears sudden may have a much longer history.

Not All Chaos Is the Same. Not All Order Is Healthy.

Chaos and order do not sit neatly at opposite ends of a spectrum. "Tight" is not necessarily functional order, and "loose" is not necessarily dysfunctional chaos. A tightly organized community can still be rigid, contradictory, or unable to respond when conditions change. A loosely organized community may function remarkably well through shared culture, trust, skill, responsiveness, and tacit coordination.



Jillian Hovey with ChatGPT (OpenAI)

How organized a community looks does not necessarily tell us how well its parts actually work together.

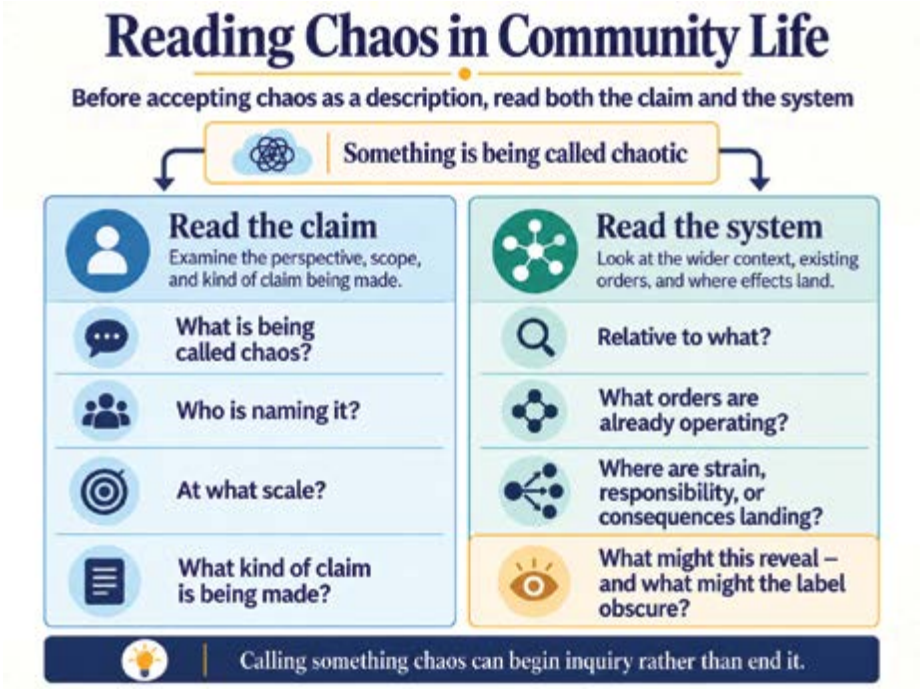
Chronic chaos can become erosive, keeping people busy reacting and compensating until they are exhausted. It can even protect the existing order by making it harder to get enough footing to question the pattern or offer effective feedback. A system can stay highly patterned while steadily using up people's attention and capacity.

A disturbance is not the same thing as chaos. What feels chaotic can include interruptions to the existing order that signal that something no longer fits. A disturbance may expose something previously hidden, break open a form that no longer fits, or create an opportunity for adjustment and evolution. How people and systems meet those signals can make a great deal of difference to what follows.

Novelty and Magic

I have been in communities where a leader thrives on "newness"—new people, new projects, new possibilities. The energy around something new can be wonderfully enlivening. People get excited, possibilities open up, and sometimes people do not want to leave. At one place, the catch phrase was "Change your ticket!" because people kept wanting to stay longer.

But continual newness also means continual disturbance. Each arrival asks the existing system to adjust. When the next person,



Jillian Hovey with ChatGPT (OpenAI)

When we call a situation "chaotic," these questions invite us to slow down the label and look more closely at who is naming the problem, what else is happening, and where the effects are landing.

project, or possibility arrives before the last one has really been absorbed, systems can have little opportunity to settle, learn, and mature. Constant novelty can become part of a community's "order," even when that order feels chaotic to the people trying to live more deeply inside it. The initial flush of excitement can look rather different over time. I have seen people captivated by all that possibility become ground down as they tried to create enough continuity and order for the community to thrive and evolve.

I remember my first Rainbow Gathering. A young, stoned man was lounging in the sun, marveling that all we had to do was put a little money in the Magic Hat and everything we needed would magically appear. Even though I was only in my 20s, I knew the "magic" depended on a lot of work and coordination, much of it behind the scenes. Supplies had to be brought in, massive amounts of food prepared, and water and sanitation managed, all in an off-grid setting. The Magic Hat was one visible piece of order within a much larger ecology of labor and responsibility.

The Politics of Flow

The gap between what looks effortless and the work underneath it is one reason the language of "flow" has often made me uneasy. I have often heard it used when someone is encouraged, or admonished, to "just be in the flow." It has left me wondering: "Flow of what, and for whom?" A shared situation can feel wonderfully emergent to someone freer to improvise, and quite different to someone carrying more of the responsibilities that make that "flow" possible. The promised airport pickup, after all, is unlikely to happen by telepathy alone.

Flow and freedom can privilege certain people. Whose preferred ways of operating become the norm? Who can opt out without much consequence, and who has to adapt around them? What does that "freedom" cost the people underwriting it? Labor can remain invisible, priorities deferred, and somebody's capacity quietly become a resource for everyone else. Some members' freedom can be purchased through others' unseen capacity.

The politics become harder to examine when preferred ways of operating are tied to ideals such as freedom, nonhierarchy, or non-coercion. Questioning their consequences can then begin to sound like questioning who "we" are.

When Order Meets Its Consequences

Communities do not only develop ways of operating. We also develop stories about what those ways mean and what kind of community they make us. "We are nonhierarchical." "We practice non-coercion." "We are regenerative." Those aspirations can become part of the order itself, shaping what feels normal, legitimate, or worth protecting. Identity can help hold an order in place. That can make contradictory information harder to hear. Evidence of informal hierarchy may feel like an accusation in a community that understands itself as nonhierarchical. A request for more coordination may sound like control when freedom is a central value.

More formal structure is hardly a guarantee against problems, either. Near the end of 2014, I was teaching at a European residential center rooted in a centuries-old Eastern spiritual tradition. There was certainly no shortage of order. Lineage, hierarchy, seniority, and prescribed forms all carried considerable weight. Yet alongside all that order, I encountered remarkable negativity, infighting, status sensitivity, and relational dysfunction. The experience was a useful reminder. A looser order can make room for spontaneity while shifting work and responsibility onto others. A stronger order can preserve continuity and hard-won learning while also preserving patterns that need to be disturbed. Neither tells us, by itself, whether the order is serving life well.

Whatever a community believes about itself, its ways of organizing keep producing effects: people leave, work stalls, conflict recurs, exhaustion builds, or the same people keep compensating. When those effects contradict what the community believes its order is accomplishing, the discrepancy becomes feedback.

Capacity Changes the Picture

Feedback is one thing. Having the capacity to work with it is another. What one community can absorb may overwhelm another, or the same community when its capacity is already stretched. A major emergency can sometimes be met with remarkable steadiness and coordination, while a series of modest stresses can overwhelm a group that is already de-

pleted. What is happening matters, and so does the capacity available to meet it.

Capacity is not only an individual quality. Some of it lives in people: tolerating uncertainty, exercising judgment, taking responsibility, staying open to learning. Capacity also lives between people, in trust and the ability to communicate and coordinate. Some capacity is built into the community itself through shared memory, clear roles, workable decision-making, and enough time and resources to absorb strain. These forms of capacity interact. Our community orders can support and distribute capacity, or steadily use it up.

Back in the spring of 1997, when I was helping to run the Ecovillage Training Center at The Farm in Tennessee, we were preparing to offer back-to-back ecovillage and permaculture design courses. We had just welcomed a very large group of new interns, and there was a lot going on. I remember saying to the team that the people about to arrive would not know how hard we had been working. What they would encounter was how present and connected we were, and how well we worked together to support their experience. We had built that capacity together, and would keep growing it as we received the next groups.

That kind of capacity matters not only when a group is busy or under strain, but also when something is not working. Can friction become information? Can disagreement be examined without immediately becoming a threat? Can consequences help a community see its own patterns more clearly? Capacity gives us more room to stay with what is happening instead of simply reacting to it. Capacity can also include recognizing limits, slowing down, or redistributing responsibility.

Reading the Signals

Friction can accumulate until needs repeatedly go unmet, coordination breaks down, compensations multiply, and more and more energy goes into managing the effects. Reading the signals earlier can interrupt that movement toward chaos. Friction, disturbance, recurring conflict, or the same problem showing up again can all tell us that our orders do not fit what is actually happening.

Reading the signal does not automatically tell us what needs to change in the order. Sometimes an agreement needs clarifying, a role strengthening, or responsibility made more explicit. Sometimes the existing order is part of the problem and needs to loosen or change. Sometimes what first looks like disruption is useful disturbance, showing us something the existing order was not allowing us to see. We learn by noticing, trying a response, and paying attention to what happens next.

Whether the order is actually changing becomes clearer over time. If the same signals keep appearing and the same people keep compensating, the underlying order may not have changed much at all. If a pattern is recognized sooner, responsibilities shift, practices change, or people become better able to respond without recreating the same breakdown, learning has begun to change how shared life is organized. Reading and responding to signals can help keep ordinary friction from accumulating into chronic chaos while still leaving room for disturbance to do useful work.

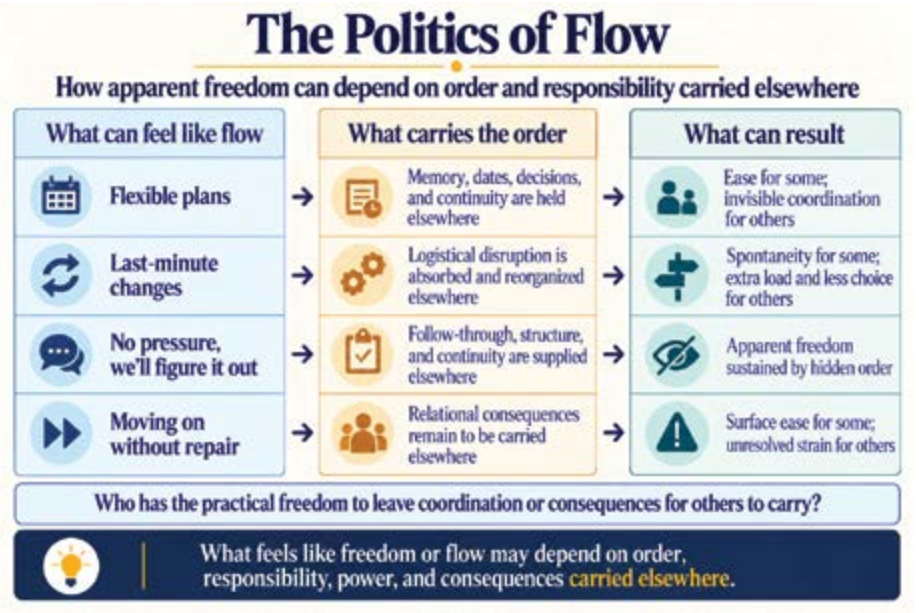
What Are We Actually Generating?

The goal is not a community without chaos or disturbance, nor one that has finally perfected its orders. Intentional communities will continue to live with friction, uncertainty, novelty, and multiple textures of order. Chaos according to whom and relative to what? The question remains important, but it is not the only one. We can also ask what patterns keep repeating, whose capacity is being drawn upon, and whether the signals are being taken up.

What are our ways of organizing actually generating? Are they increasing people's capacity to participate, contribute, create, care, learn, and take responsibility? Are they creating freedom for some by drawing invisibly on others? When friction or disturbance tells us that something is not fitting, can we respond before ordinary strain hardens into chronic chaos?

Perhaps life-serving order is not an order that finally gets everything right, but one that supports our capacity for collective life, helps us learn from disturbance, and remains responsive to what its patterns are producing.

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Jillian Hovey with ChatGPT (OpenAI)

Flexible plans, last-minute changes, loose agreements, and moving on without repair can feel easy from one position while creating very different experiences elsewhere in the community.

Clear, Adaptable, Accountable: Building Structures for Participation

By Bea Becker



Co-opers line up to serve themselves at Saturday dinner.



Special meal head cooks Coby and Emmett announce their meal.

The dining room of Harkness buzzes with the clatter of plates and laughter among friends, and as 7 o'clock comes and goes, you might not even notice as six co-op members excuse themselves from their conversations, tie on aprons, and set to work cleaning the kitchen after another, successful 100+ person meal.

This is an average evening in Hark, the largest housing and dining co-op in the Oberlin Student Cooperative Association (OSCA), an organization that provides alternative housing and dining options to almost 400 Oberlin College students across its community of co-ops. Each day, members of OSCA, who are also busy college students, work together to prepare and clean up lunch and dinner for their fellow co-opers, as well as taking responsibility for the administration of the organization and participating in a vibrant social culture.

OSCA, whose first co-op opened in 1950 and which was officially incorporated in 1962, has undergone massive changes over the years. It has grown and shrunk and grown again, opened and closed different co-ops, and it continues to change with every generation of students which passes through its kitchens. If there is one lesson OSCA might offer the broader communities movement, I would argue it is in how to build community structures that actively support participation in a diverse and busy member population that is constantly changing.

The very nature of our organization, in particular the high turnover that comes from being a student organization, means that to maintain viability, we have to recruit lots of new members every year and teach them how to participate in our systems. And for an organization like this to stay rooted in democratic member control, we have to constantly update and reevaluate our policies to make sure they're in line with what members want now. Through observing OSCA's systems, first as a member and now as a staff member, I've come to understand that three key principles underlie the success of our structures of participation: clarity, adaptability, and accountability.

Clarity

Getting members of your community to participate in shared labor, decision-making, or any other element of communal life requires clarity at all levels. What does participation look like? How do you bring new members up to speed on your community's particular ways of working, making decisions, and being with each other?

In OSCA, we start from a very simple expectation: members of dining co-ops are expected to do five hours of labor every week, which is what makes our dining plan cheaper than the college's option. There are many ways that co-ops modify and elaborate this system, which I'll talk about later, but the basic simplicity is key. If you pay your bill, and show up to your shifts, you've done everything you need to do, and there's never

any question of if you're "pulling your weight" in the community. That's the floor of what it means to participate, and if you want to sit on it, no one can judge you. This clarity of expectation provides peace of mind that makes it easier to join, because new members know what they're committing to.

Clarity of expectation is only one part of creating clear structures for participation. The other is accessibility of information. This is a tougher nut to crack, one that we're still working to achieve in OSCA: how do we give people the information they need to successfully participate in their co-op?

Some parts of this we have figured out; for example, all members of a co-op have to undergo food safety and kitchen clean-up training every semester, which helps to make sure that we're all on the same page about how to maintain proper hygiene and keep the kitchen in good working order.

In other areas, we're less close; most co-opers don't have a super advanced understanding of OSCA's more in-depth policies, and often there can be a learning curve to participating in consensus discussions, meaning that when members join they often don't feel confident to speak up until a semester or two into their co-op life. Figuring out how to increase availability of information and better train our new members to participate in decision-making is a place where OSCA's adaptability comes in handy. OSCA's board (whose members represent the opinions of each co-op) recently voted to revive a staff position called the Education and History Coordinator, who will work to raise consciousness around co-operative values and history, and augment our information structures. This is just one of the many decisions made by the board every semester, as we try to change the organization to meet the needs and problems of its members.

Adaptability

What makes OSCA incredible is its ability to adapt to the needs and interests of its members. Because of the inherent turnover of the organization, each semester a co-op can have substantively different membership than the one before, so every co-op reevaluates its policies and elects new people to take on certain responsibilities. Problems that came up in the last semester are brought up in discussion at the beginning of the next, and new policies are put in place to attempt to remedy them. Old policies that have become outdated are removed. *Why not try things this way, we think, we can always change it later.*

In Hark, where I live and dine, the abundance of hours that come from having over 100 members allows for flexibility in what we want to devote our collective labor energy to. While we have always, in recent memory, elected certain positions, like Head Cook, Bread Maker, or Food Safety Coordinator, co-opers can also propose "Independent Betterment Projects" to contribute to the co-op in a way of their choosing, like running "Coffee Club" to make cold brew for interested members, or using their pottery skills to make more bowls and mugs for the co-op.

The diversity of available positions not only provides outlets for the particular skills and interests of our members, it also allows for people with different working styles and needs to participate fully in the community. If you prefer working on your own schedule or at night, you can do a "maker" job, and bake bread, tasty treats, or granola in the evenings. If you have accessibility needs that would make it difficult or impossible to do kitchen work, you might run for a more administrative role in the co-op, like Board Representative, Missed Job Advocate, or Accessibility Coordinator. OSCA has a strong culture around accessibility, which generally allows for a lot of leeway around creating space for people to contribute how they can, without pressure for that to look the same for everyone.

You might worry that a system like this would lead to no one doing the more undesirable jobs, which is part of why we have a system that asks everyone who is able to do to at least one clean-up shift per week, but the short term commitment of a single semester tends to embolden people to try new jobs. In my first semester, Hark was struggling to find someone to run for Workchart Coordinator, the position responsible for coordinating the schedules of every co-oper and assigning shifts. I watched a series of more experienced co-opers turn down nominations before I thought, *I could do that!* I nominated myself,



Granola maker Lulu shows off their first batch.



A co-oper in action, rolling out cookies during their special meal cookshift.

Photos by Bea Becker



Head cook Oona shows off his menu and curry.



Flourishing potted peppers and tomatoes on the Harkness porch. Caring for the garden is one way some of our co-opers contribute their hours.

and was elected. I liked the job so much that a month later I decided to run for the all-OSCA cousin to that position, Membership Secretary.

Which brings me to the flip side of that five-hour/week floor of participation: OSCA's staff positions. OSCA hires over 30 of its members for staff positions, paying them to handle everything from finances to event planning to food safety and more. These positions range in the amount of time expected, from the 30-50 hours per semester that all co-opers do to 260-290 hours per semester for the officer team. Having these positions allows for people who have more time and energy for OSCA to get valuable experience and invest themselves more deeply in the organization.

This is just a sampling of the ways that OSCA's members are able to find their mode of participation based on their skills, interests, and needs. But the adaptability of the structures isn't just about a broad menu of options, but the goal of creating space for every member to participate in the way that works for them. If a certain job stops being of value to a co-op or no one wants to do it, it can be struck. If a co-op has enough hours, they can offer "time aid," which allows its busiest members to do fewer hours each week. If a member finds that certain elements of the co-op are inaccessible for them, they can reach out to an Accessibility Coordinator for support in finding alternatives or changing policies to better accommodate them. All of this comes back to a basic belief that the structures of participation should accommodate and adapt to what members want now, not that members should squeeze into pre-existing structures created by people who are long-since graduated.

Accountability

All of these on-ramps to participation are great, offering many clear options for how to engage, but they can't work without accountability. I like to think about accountability as not just "how do we address members not meeting their commitments?" but as a broader issue of "how do we make sure that our system works the way it says it does?" This includes individual members upholding their commitment to co-op work, and just as important, a collective commitment to following the policy that the community democratically decided on.

Frankly, OSCA's accountability systems are not as strong as our culture of adaptability or our clear expectations of our members, but that doesn't mean they don't exist. Each co-op elects someone to track missed shifts, which are usually reported through a Google form, and remedy them in keeping with their co-op's policy. In Hark, we have a Missed Job Advocate who reaches out to members when they miss a shift and helps them find a shift to make it up with. Over time, multiple missed shifts that aren't made up can be grounds for expulsion from a co-op or from OSCA. Most of the time, when someone reaches this point, they're already finding that OSCA doesn't work for them, and leaving on their own.

Our accountability systems for our staff members are stronger. All paid staff have to turn in "Stipend Reports" which detail how many hours they worked each month and doing what, which are published in the Board Packet, for all members to see. These reports are reviewed in detail by the Personnel Committee of the Board, and reviewed again at the (public) Board Meeting. When staff are under hours, the Personnel Committee can decide on various ways to check in with them, and if they fail to submit their reports, they can receive Staff Missed Jobs, three of which will remove them from their position.

One co-op, Keep, is experimenting with requiring similar reports from their more intangible elected positions, like Dining Loose Ends Coordinator or Accessibility Coordinator, to create stronger accountability systems for these jobs. Adaptability in action!

Applying These Principles

Clarity, Adaptability, Accountability. Sure, those are nice things to have, but how do you use these principles to actually fix participation problems in your community?

I'll illustrate with an example of where Hark's structures aren't quite working—our house is pretty nasty. Unlike in our dining program, which has a clearly defined workchart, a form to report shift absences, and a system for making them up, our housing program can feel a bit...half-cocked. While we technically elect members to assign chores and check that they get done, the more minor hours commitment (one hour/week) means that the system can easily fall apart, and pretty soon the bathroom hasn't been swept in weeks and no one knows who should be held responsible (or what that would even mean).

How could we apply our principles to fixing Hark's housing chore problem?

Clarity: Is the way our chores are being communicated effective? Do people know what they're responsible for? Do they have the information they need to do them properly (e.g., where the mop is, what dilution of peroxide to use)?

If the answer is no, what else can we try: should we switch to a written chore chart on the wall instead of sending out chores in an email? Should we have a "chore training" similar to "crew training" that happens in our dining program?

Adaptability: Is the structure of our chores working for the way that our members actually live?

The answer here is also, I think, no. The current expectation that chores are done twice a week, by Wednesday and Sunday nights, tends to allow for a lot of procrastination and forgetting. So we might experiment with a different structure, where chores aren't done independently twice a week, but in teams at an appointed time, to get more done together and to provide the accountability of working in a group. Alternately, instead of specific chores being assigned, members could be given an area that they're responsible for checking on and keeping clean, which might engender a stronger sense of responsibility.

Accountability: How do we make sure that the system we agree on is actually happening? Who is responsible for administering it? How do we create a culture where chores actually get done?

Here, we might change from having Cleanliness Coordinators assign and check chores to having Housing Loose Ends Coordinators (our version of Residential Assistants), who are paid staffers and have a higher hours expectation, do that work. We might make chore assignments and completion more public to encourage positive peer pressure.

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Of course, different communities have different needs, and OSCA is in many ways unique. We rely heavily on these principles because of our size and turnover rate, but I think they apply to issues of participation in all kinds of communities of all sizes.

Building clear expectation of what and how much is expected of each member prevents conflict, overwork, and resentment. It allows for people to budget their energy, set boundaries, and contribute to the community without wondering if they're not doing enough or doing more than everyone else. And while it might not make sense for every community to reevaluate their policies or elect new positions twice a year, getting in the habit of discussing and experimenting with how things get done builds a sense of ownership and leads to innovation. Similarly, switching up who holds different responsibilities avoids power hoarding and spreads knowledge through the community. Finally, creating good systems of accountability is the glue holding together structures of participation. If members trust that the agreed-upon system will be upheld, they will engage in it in good faith. Nothing is more dispiriting than rules on a sign that no one pays attention to.

Bea Becker currently serves as the Membership Secretary of the Oberlin Student Cooperative Association (at Oberlin College and Conservatory, Oberlin, Ohio), one of the largest student housing-and-dining co-ops in the US (see osca.coop). Their other writing can be found at beabecker.substack.com.



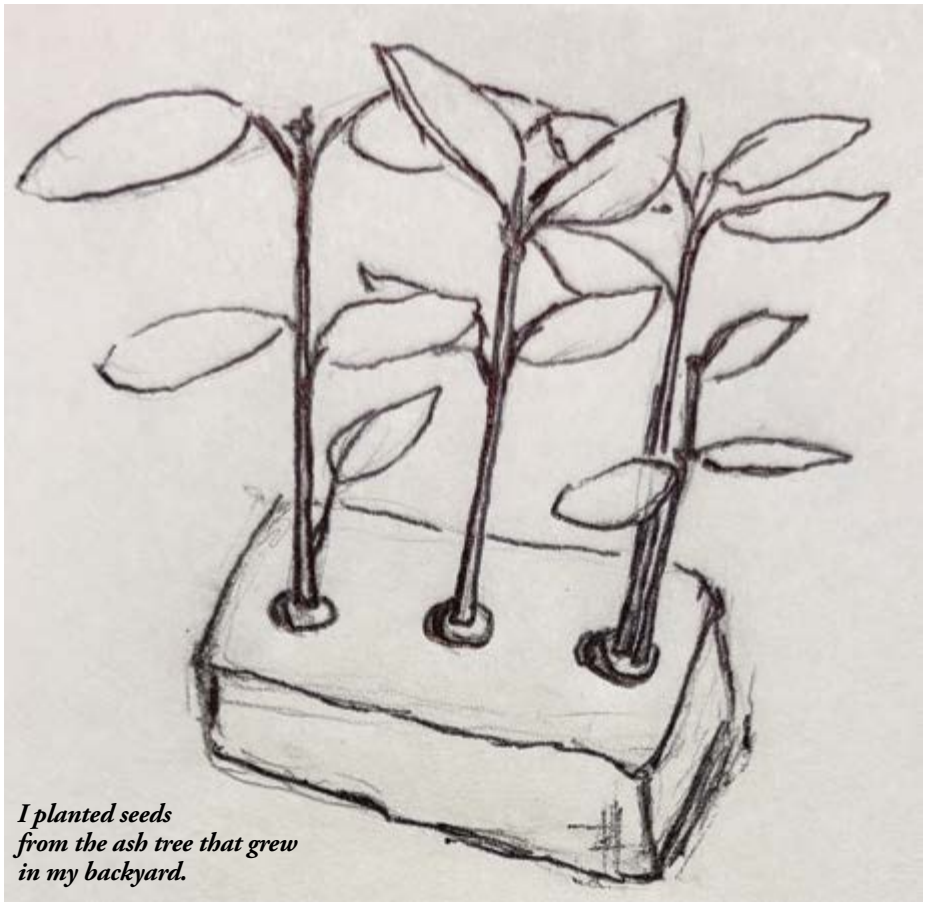
OSCAns dance at a Porchella set. This annual student music showcase is made possible by the work of OSCA's student staffers.



Hark members enjoy their dinner outside.

Beautiful Chaos, Resilient Future

By Ezra Stevens



I planted seeds from the ash tree that grew in my backyard.

When I was four years old, I planted seeds from the ash tree that grew in my backyard. They fell in twirling flocks, each encased in the hardened end of a tiny paddle-shaped leaf. My fingers carefully peeled these open and took the green hearts from within. I knew that any growing thing in my yard would swiftly be cut by the lawnmower—but I had a plan. At one corner of my house lay a brick with three dirt-filled circular holes in its center. I pressed the seeds into these three protected spaces, then watered them every day that summer. The trees grew. And they even survived the winter. And I watered them every day the summer that followed. Their thin woody stems—no thicker than my five-year-old pinky finger—propped up big, oval-shaped, green umbrellas that looked too large for their twiggy bodies. They were my own little secret. Something beautiful that I, only five, was bringing into the world. Then one day as I came to water my trees, I discovered only the tiniest severed stumps. When I asked my mother, she said they were growing too close to the house.

I think this was my first glimpse at the restrictive *order* that ruled my world.

Today, I am 22. It's been 17 years since tiny ash trees, growing inside a brick in suburban Wisconsin, were cut. I imagine, if these trees had been transplanted, if one survived, there would now be a tree growing up with me. It would be over 30 feet tall. Sending its own seeds a'spin. I want to write an essay about chaos and order. But it's also the story of how I came to the intentional communities movement. It's a thread of my own reflections and memories, some from long ago, some not so long yet. It's about beautiful things, about spontaneity, self-determined labor, and mutual reciprocity—and finally—it's an essay about the future.

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As a child, I had a lot of questions about the world. *Why did we cut the grass? Why are the walls all straight sides and only one color? Why do all the houses and buildings look the same and not have surprises and secret passageways? Why is the land "No Trespassing"? Why can't I draw on the walls?* I wanted to do more than draw on the walls. I wanted to plaster them with layers on layers of paper maché, paint, leaves and twigs and string, make them into maps of made-up worlds. Hang paper stars and cranes from the ceiling. Place moss and stones on the floor.

I thought the world was beautiful. Whenever I saw a forest or thrumming tallgrass prairie or croaking wetland (which was the nature of my Midwest childhood) I could not help but feel this was so. But...this nature was not part of the world in which I was taught that humans could live. Around urbanized Milwaukee, the natural world was contained within small county parks, gridlocked by the sea of orderly human habitation. Further from the city, when we drove to visit my grandparents, I would watch from out the car window as we passed farm patches interwoven with forest, field, and marsh. I think I was 11 when the new developments started. Suddenly, there appeared the timber frames of many houses

being built on bare land bulldozed over. Complete, the new homes stood in rows, impractically large and identical, like toy houses from a toy store. Each claimed a big tract of neat lawn, an isolated pod far away from everything and everyone.

As the years passed, I watched forest, field, and marsh make way for more such islands of uniformity. And also the strip malls, mega-marts, and business parks that stretched themselves out—like Manifest Destiny settlers—stretched into all the vast space available to them. They mowed their vast surroundings to a short buzz-cut of lawn and shaved the sides of the roadways, save a thin strip, sometimes, here and there, of cattails: souvenirs of what had once been.

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When I, 18, visited my first ecovillage, my first thought was that it was so *beautiful*. The homes were each one of a kind and so too was the design of the land—coauthored by its human and more-than-human residents. I could not have enough time to soak in every *detail!* All the hidden secrets in the architecture. Shingles that were shaped into faces and birds, if you let your eyes linger until they found the right place, or knew where to look. The way wood supports rose curving and twisting through their natural undulations, up into a branch, not sawed off for convenience, but smoothed and tangling into the roof. Textured tile art pressed into the floor. Natural artifacts and art that covered every wall.

This communal space (*communal space!*) was full of life! In its center flourished a garden. Myriad growing things; so much abundance. Beyond this community plot, too, surrounding each house, were more small and beautiful gardens, something between control and uncontrolled. After this, the threads of my curiosity led me to visit other ecovillages, intentional communities, and communal land-based projects. I saw new expressions of human-nature ecology in more variations than I thought. In one large ecovillage, I marveled at how a place home to 150 humans felt as though it was entirely in the middle of the woods and meadow. In another, I learned how indigenous communities had been part of the land's ecology for millennia, then saw how these practices, such as prescribed burns and controlled harvest, were continued by those living there today.

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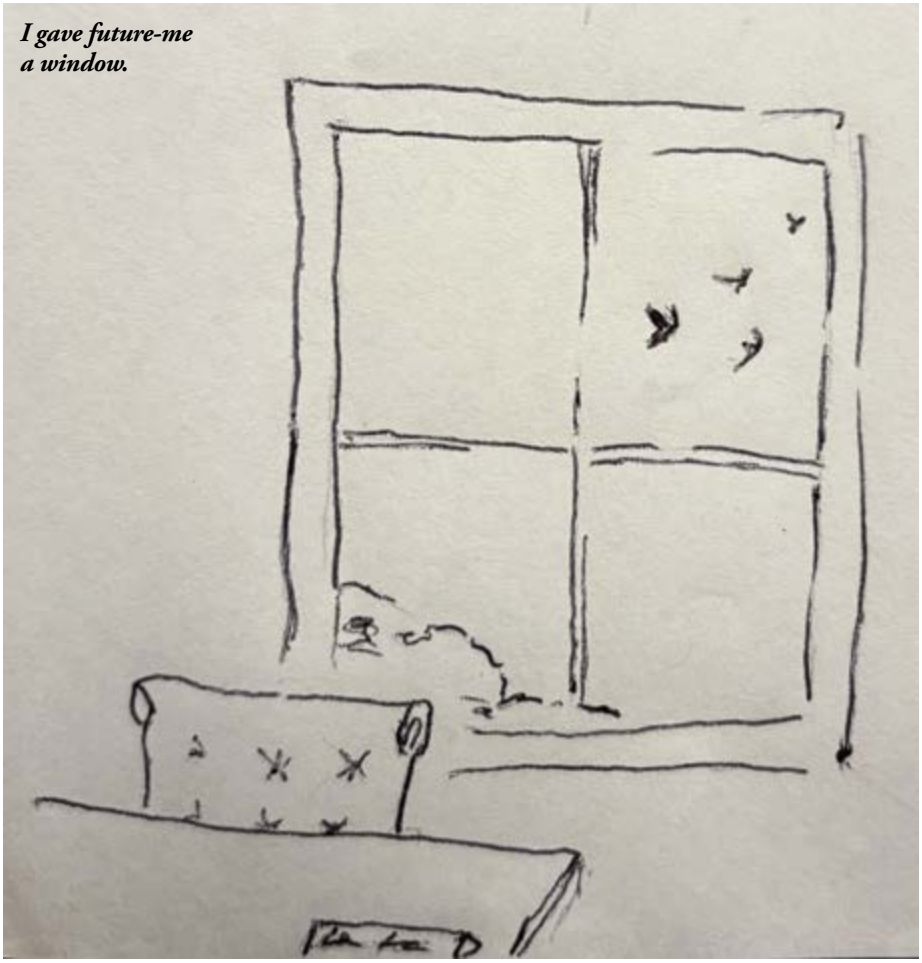
As a child I was afraid to grow up, to be an adult. My only model for how this looked was to work, 40 hours a week or more, year after year, decade after decade, every day the same. One job, one role and identity–for the rest and most of my life. My parents both worked for different banks. On the annual *Take Your Child to Work!* events, I caught glimpses into the world in which my mother spent her days. I saw her desk: a small, gray, plastic (or was it metal?) thing, within a beige-felted flimsy cubicle-form, zigzagged into a maze of many others in a dark-walled building of dim artificial light, far from any window...before the guides ushered us back to impressive conference rooms to play games about the stock market. But I couldn't forget the heartbreaking little desk where my mother spent her days, nine to five, and often more, five days a week, almost every week of the year. How many hours of her life, what *percentage* of a human lifetime was sold to this?

I was taught to believe the future wouldn't be any better than this. That this was *privilege*. (Unfortunately, in many ways this is true. But I don't think it should be.) I was taught that, in order for the world to function, everyone must be organized and ordered into one role, fortunate if it was a specialized role with qualifications, because the alternative was becoming trapped in a lifetime of "unskilled" labor, in which one would never have enough. Everything must be done by someone qualified. Building one's own home? No, one had to have special approved certifications for that, and it had to fit with the planning and laws. Making those decisions? Another qualified role. "What about an artist?" I had asked. "What if I want to be an artist?" My parents didn't entertain it. It was a path to no future. Being an artist was highly sought after, but not very useful, so there were few artist-spots available. Even if one could succeed, they would only be taking the spot of another. I was taught that humans are lazy



Shingles that were shaped into faces.

Art by Ezra Stevens



I gave future-me a window.

and full of greed. That only through order could this be channeled into productivity. "What do you want to be when you grow up?" we were asked in the second grade. My classmates drew themselves as a pop star, a baseball player, an explorer. I drew a lawyer. I gave future-me a suit, a nice desk. I gave future-me a window.

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When I came to that first ecovillage, I was astonished by how I saw the work of this community done. Everyone was seen as qualified to be a decision-maker, a cocreator of the place they wanted to inhabit. Everyone could be an artist. From designing the beauty of the spaces they made to sharing songs—not used for profit, not scorned by competitors, but something organic and intimate. Everyone, too, took part in the "unskilled," "unromantic" labor of gardening and building and so forth. Except, it didn't feel like a diminishing thing to do. There were no time clocks, no managers of hierarchical salary, no customer/worker dichotomy. As I joined in this work, I had some of the most meaningful conversations I felt I'd had in years. It was okay, to breathe it in, to be unhurried. My time belonged to me and was given freely.

There's another community I've visited, an agroecology farm, where the experience of labor stands out to me in a beautiful way. Only a few individuals lived and worked there daily, yet they often invited many others to come for a week and cocreate a brief—yet intensely intimate—community. When I visited on such an occasion, I found out that many in my group had been coming for years. I felt that I understood why almost immediately. The amount of care that these community members showed one another was extraordinary. I saw what it looks like to actively and intentionally make a space that is welcoming to all. Those with neurodivergent ways of thinking and being, those like myself and many of our number who are queer, those with greater accessibility needs including chronic fatigue; all were enthusiastically welcomed no matter how much or in which ways they could contribute. Listening to our host, it was clear we were not there to be her labor force, but rather to perform the radical task of communal creation and land stewardship. During this week, there was no obligation to any minimum amount of work. Laboring while others rested, resting while others labored, weaving in and out of tasks—the work felt as organic and invigorating as breath.

This was absolute *chaos* to the time-controlled, top-down-managed working world I had known. Yet so much work happened. The work was building a greenhouse and harvesting abundant plums, and cooking meals, making jams, breads, cobblers, and cordials, herding stubborn sheep. The work was also building a letter-box—cut and colored earth-punk style—to collect letters for activists in prison, and painting huge, beautiful protest banners. We ate so well. At dusk, we swam in the cool ocean and sang on the rocky shore. At night, we dipped in and out of the sauna to sit by a crackling fire. We tilted our heads towards a dark night sky spilled over with a hundred thousand stars.

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I grew up in a world of rigid order. I was taught that this created balance and prosperity. I think I was 10 when I was first told about what was called "global warming." The fault was everyone's, I was told, for making bad choices, and the way to solve it was to use my power as a consumer to buy metal straws and organic food to influence the market. I went to climate protests. Seeing my youthful face, the older generations came up to me and said I gave them hope, that my generation would be the one to fix things. "Maybe *you'll* be the one to figure our way out of this," they said to me. I think they thought that was inspirational. I hear about the future now. I hear that there will be no jobs for me no matter what major and career path I choose. I hear that renting the smallest room will cost me nearly all of every 40 hour work week's paycheck. That AI will render my skill and intelligence obsolete, reducing me to an "unskilled" laborer. I see images

of genocide. Of profitable war. Of generational poverty, of systematic racial inequality, of climate chaos, political what-the-fuck, ecological mass destruction…

The future is *chaos*.

I used to not understand it. The uniformity, the separation of diversity, how people could live with the sterile lives they built or accepted around them. But now, I think I do. To them, I think it feels like stability. We all sense the crises that stack around us, and are all looking for something to hold onto. For many, strict order and a world without diversity and difference looks like one in which everything will stay exactly the way it is. But this structure does not exist to provide stability to the world for the future to come. Its only purpose is to move the world's wealth, and only towards those with wealth already. So, for the few who *do* hold such power, the status quo may indeed secure a few more generations of "everything is safe and good"; but for all others this structure of greed leads to crises and deepening poverty. It has always been like this.

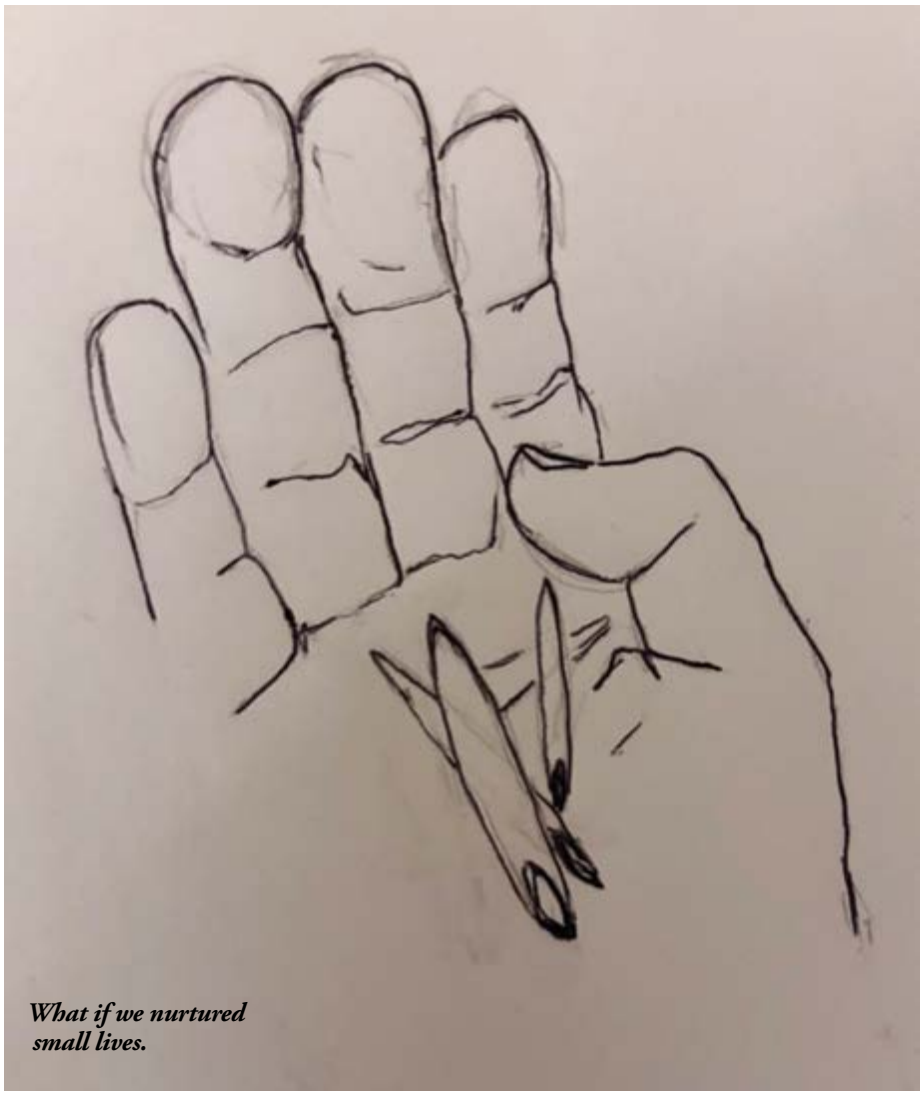
Many have already seen—are seeing—the future of their people disappear under the world order of colonial capitalism. Indigenous peoples, who for hundreds of years have been forced from their homes and culture; historical and present [wage]slaves subjugated to produce wealth that they themselves will never see; refugees fleeing war and disaster, their children born stateless in temporary living situations.

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In ecology, resilience is found in diversity and mutualistic relationships. When I need to find solid ground, I think of the communities I've visited and been a part of. Reciprocity looks so natural when one is connected to others in such a genuine way. I think about the activism I've witnessed, people fighting for one another's needs, which doesn't feel so impossible when one doesn't have to fight alone. I think of how abundantly the Earth provides when people come together around a shared land and task. I think about the care I was shown when I started showing up at a Unitarian Universalist church's community dinners while struggling on my own after high school. I think of the support I've witnessed around communal grief practices. I think of the networks that are formed between people and groups fighting many different battles, creating many different sanctuaries—and it all feels like safety. It feels like a future none of us has to face alone.

I came to the communities movement because in it I saw beauty and meaningful livelihood beyond the rigid world I'd known. I'm choosing to continue building my life in community with others because I believe it's where the world will find resilience in an uncertain future. Eighteen years ago I planted ash trees. They were cut down because they didn't fit the order of the world around them. But what if we nurtured small lives? What if we grew up together? Chose our own future together? I want to be a little subversive. Break a crack in the world's restrictions and wedge a space between for other things to grow. Just see what happens.

Ezra Stevens (they/them) is a third-year student at Oberlin College, studying Creative Writing and Environmental Studies with a concentration in communal land-based practices. Their past experience in ecovillages and intentional communities has inspired this path of study and continues to inform the future they want to build. In July and August of 2026, Ezra conducted independent research on intentional communities in Europe with the support of Communities *and funding from their higher education institute. As part of this project, they visited Sieben Linden, Schloss Tempelhof, ZEGG, Lebensgarten Steyerberg, Fivepenny Farm, and squatters communities in southwest England. Ezra can be reached at esteven1@oberlin.edu.*



What if we nurtured small lives.

When The Dream Turned Feral: Chaos, Order, and the Community that Broke Itself

By Corbin Prydwen

In 2020, I bought 10 acres in rural Virginia with the intention of rebuilding the intentional community that had previously existed on the land, though it had no residents when I arrived. My initial plan was to invite unhoused individuals from Roanoke to live there and participate in a cooperative, shared-labor community model, but the distance from city resources made that unworkable. I then turned to TikTok, inspired by The Garden in Tennessee, which was openly welcoming new members at the time. By that point, I had already moved two people—Stephen and Cheyenne, both autistic and needing structure—onto the property with the intention of mentoring them. The arrangement was simple: contribute labor, share resources, and participate in the stewardship of the land as part of a small, cooperative community.

That was the idea. The reality turned out differently…

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People talk about intentional community as if it's a sanctuary—a place where the world slows down, where people finally breathe, where chaos dissolves into harmony. I believed that too, once. I believed that if I created the right environment, the right land, the right invitation, people would rise to it. They would bring order into the chaos of their lives, and together we'd build something stable, something healing, something real.

But here's what I learned the hard way: chaos doesn't disappear when you build a community—it moves in with the people.

My life in community wasn't a balance of chaos and order. It was a tug-of-war. A daily negotiation between what I was trying to build and what people carried with them. I didn't realize it at the time, but the wider chaos of the world—the instability, the loneliness, the collapse of social fabric—was exactly what drove people to my land. They weren't coming for community. They were coming for rescue. They were coming for escape. They were coming for a place where they didn't have to face themselves.

And I, in my own hunger for order, thought I could hold it all.

The first people who arrived came with stories that sounded like redemption arcs. They wanted healing. They wanted belonging. They wanted a fresh start. But they didn't want the transformation community requires. They wanted the benefits of order without the discipline of it. They wanted the dream without the labor. They wanted the land to fix them.

And I tried. God, I tried.

But one regulated person cannot hold 10 dysregulated people. One grounded adult cannot stabilize a group of people who have never known stability. One founder cannot be the governance, the emotional container, the conflict mediator, the parent, the therapist, the boundary, and the backbone all at once.

Yet that's exactly who I became.

> I watched people use chaos to wield power—to avoid accountability, to manipulate, to destabilize the group so they could feel in control. And I watched people accuse me of being "too controlling" the moment I tried to create order.

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Chaos showed up in every corner of the land. In the messes left behind after people wandered off. In the tools that "went missing" and somehow never returned. In

the food that evaporated from the pantry. In the emotional explosions that came out of nowhere—the kind where someone goes from calm to volcanic in 30 seconds. In the way people resisted any form of structure, as if boundaries were oppression and accountability was violence. People wanted freedom, but what they meant was freedom from responsibility. They wanted community, but what they meant was a place where nothing was required of them except their presence.

The tension between chaos and order wasn't philosophical. It was daily life. Governance became improvisation. Social relations became crisis management. Shared facilities became battlegrounds. Values became whatever someone needed to justify their behavior that day. Spirituality became an excuse to avoid work. Politics became a weapon to resist structure.

I watched people use chaos to wield power—to avoid accountability, to manipulate, to destabilize the group so they could feel in control. And I watched people accuse me of being "too controlling" the moment I tried to create order. That's the shadow of freedom: when it becomes chaos. And the shadow of order: when it becomes control. I lived both.

The land reflected it. When people were there, the place felt feral—overgrown, tense, buzzing with unspoken conflict. When they left, the land breathed again. The birds came back. The air softened. Nature returned to balance long before the humans did.

The cycle repeated itself over and over. A wave of chaos. A desperate attempt at order. Another wave of chaos. Another attempt at order. I kept thinking I could find the sweet spot—that middle place where freedom and structure coexist. But the truth is, the sweet spot isn't a place. It's a people. And I didn't have the right people.

I had Seekers who wanted the community to fix their lives. Idealists who thought boundaries were oppression. Helpers who drowned in everyone else's emotions. Opportunists who treated the land like a free campground. Visionaries who loved the dream but never lifted a finger.

What I didn't have were Stewards—the people who actually make community possible.

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The collapse wasn't dramatic. It was slow. A quiet rot. A steady unraveling. The kind you don't notice until you're standing in the ruins wondering how you got there. The dream didn't explode. It decayed. And I decayed with it.

The breaking point wasn't a fight or a theft or a betrayal. It was a moment of clarity—the kind that hits you like cold water. I realized I wasn't living in a community. I was living in a collection of unmet needs. I was living in a place where everyone wanted to be held but no one wanted to hold anything. I was living in a place where chaos had become the culture.

So I did the only thing left to do. I kicked everyone out.

And the silence that followed was the first real order I'd felt in years.

People think order is structure, rules, systems. But sometimes order is solitude. Sometimes order is the moment you stop carrying everyone else's life and finally return to your own. Sometimes order is the absence of chaos.

What I learned is this: Community doesn't collapse because people are bad. It collapses because the architecture isn't strong enough to carry the weight of real human life.

I didn't fail. The structure failed. The ratio failed. The soil failed. The conditions failed.

And now I know better.

Community isn't built by longing. It's built by capacity. It's built by clarity. It's built by people who can hold themselves before they try to hold anyone else.

Chaos taught me what community is not. Order taught me what community requires. And the collapse taught me the most important truth of all:

The dream doesn't die when the people leave. The dream dies when the wrong people stay.

Corbin Prydwen is a builder, writer, and civic originator based in Floyd County, Virginia. After years of experimenting with intentional community on rural land, he is now preparing for a new chapter in Veracruz, Mexico. His work focuses on the architecture of community, capacity, and human systems.



Corbin Prydwen

Tales from the Dishpit: Can the Sink Sink Community Morale?

By Bruce Horowitz

There they were again: the director had rushed off "to attend to something important" and had left her dirty dishes sitting on the table for someone else to do. As this was a "plus one" community where we committed to regularly wash an additional cup, plate, bowl, or utensil when we washed our own, under normal circumstances someone would have gladly taken care of them. However, in this situation, which repeated itself at almost every meal, no one rushed to grab them. In fact, everyone seemed to conspicuously avoid them, myself included.

I pondered the fact that for my first month at the community, I gladly offered to wash those cast-away dishes with the thought, "she's so busy taking care of important things for the community, I'm happy to do them." Now, after a month in the community, I had joined the "fuck that" faction, which was basically everyone else. What had shifted was my perception that the director's overbooking herself was a detrimental overaccumulation of not just responsibility, but power. And since she was also the land owner, and part of just about every sociocratic circle that "governed" the place, that wasn't about to change. Therefore, doing her dishes for her would have been a tacit approval of the status quo and an enabling of a toxic situation. So the dishes sat unwashed—touched by neither the residents at an intentional community on an island that will remain unnamed, nor a director who will also remain unnamed. Needless to say, deeper discontent simmered that hot summer and in the end, as you might imagine, even deeper levels of drama ensued, but that's another story for another article.

Contrast that with the dish situation at another, much more egalitarian community I have spent many months at off-and-on again over the last several years: Dishes regularly pile up during the day; someone was busy or unmindful or actually, they were unburdened because they knew the system was set up to manage things without stress or drama.

Here's how it works: five nights a week a team of residents comes in to cook dinner for the community. Their first job is to clean the kitchen and dining area. That includes collecting and washing any and all dirty dishes (by hand) as well as putting away any clean dishes. In other words, before preparing any food, the first task is a clean reset of the space. Genius! Then the team makes dinner. Everyone eats what is usually a scrumptious meal. And then, after dinner, the same team does another full clean, including doing all the dishes from dinner. That may sound like a lot of work, but for a community of 15 to 20 people, my experience is that it's actually very doable and the complete elimination of dish drama absolutely makes it worth it! And each community member does only one shift a week, but gets fed five nights a week. And deliberately, enough food is made at each meal to have leftovers available for the next days' lunch.

Contrast that to "plus one" abuse described above or other dish drama I, and I bet other community seekers, have experienced in other community settings: to hand wash or use the dishwasher? To leave late night dirty dishes in the sink or on the counter next to? (I preferred on the counter so the sink is usable in the morning, but housemates found that "gross.") A personal pet peeve of mine has been when people at the urban farmstead in the damp Pacific Northwest where I resided for many years didn't wring out the sponge after using it—a perfect recipe for mold! Yay! No!! Or how about the chaos of the one roommate who like the director above was always rushing off and leaving piles of dirty dishes. Or the other housemate who splashed water everywhere every time they washed their dishes. (Wet floors are dangerous! More mold opportunities!!) Or people who insist on leaving the tap on the entire time they wash a single glass or bowl! Obviously they haven't mastered the permaculture of dishwashing: letting a sparse amount of soapy water from one dish cascade down onto the next dish to be washed. Of course that method requires a critical mass of dishes, which circles us back to the dilemma of where those dirty dishes live: on the counter or in the sink? "OK, screw it! let's just use the dishwasher." But then someone has to do all the work of emptying it… On and on it can go: the dishpit often turns out to be a nexus of community conflict, physical chaos, and sometimes biological hazard.

In fact, I often hear one of people's biggest objections to joining a community: "I don't want to have to wash other people's dishes." That might be true…until they find a modest-size community that over time has tapped into their collective wisdom (or in the future, has read this article) and figured out how to create a system where everyone gets fed, the dishes get done, order replaces chaos at the dishpit, and instead of engaging in dish drama, the community uses that energy to tackle all the other interesting and potentially challenging tasks that co-creating community requires! To riff on what my dad would say, "now you're cooking with (bio)gas!"

Bruce Horowitz has a Masters Degree from the Culture, Ecology and Sustainable Community Program from New College of California, is a Gaia Education Trainer, and teaches and consults on Permaculture and Ecovillage Design. See earthcraftsolutions.org and contact him at ripelandscapes@gmail.com.

Responsibility, Ecstasy, and Love While Doing Dishes

By Vera Franco and Devin Gleeson

After a collective 20+ years of communal living—a decade in Findhorn Ecovillage, founding, cofounding multiple intentional communities, visiting communities across the globe—we (Vera and Devin) have yet to hear responsibility being talked about in communities with the level of clarity and empowerment we share below. So, we start the conversation.

In this article, we present some distinctions about responsibility that might be new to you. To ground these distinctions in reality, we pass them through the example of washing dishes. In most communities, dishes have at one time or another represented points of consideration and conflict. *Who is doing the dishes? Should there ever be dishes in the sink? Do we use a dishwasher? How long is a dish allowed to be in the dishrack? And so on...*

The distinctions below apply to anything in community. We invite you to extrapolate!

A Rapid Journey Through Five Levels of Responsibility

We start with a few proposals. The first is that the way you think about responsibility defines your power to create. If you associate responsibility mainly with hardship, your actions are centered around avoiding it. If you see responsibility as joyous and an opportunity to express your authentic love, things look entirely different. Who decides how you think about responsibility? You do.

Responsibility exists on a continuum. At the lowest end is **Zero-Level of Responsibility**. As you walk along the continuum, you encounter different zones of responsibility. We'll call these zones **Child-Level**, **Adult-Level**, **High-Level**, and **Radical-Level of Responsibility**. If you include Zero-Level, you have five distinct zones.

Let's start with Child-Level. When a child makes a mess, who cleans it up? The parents. This is the essence of **Child-Level of Responsibility**: A person makes a mess, and someone else cleans it up. (It is possible for people in adult bodies to operate at Child-Level of Responsibility.) In a community, this might look like someone literally leaving physical messes around. More often, though, Child-Level of Responsibility manifests as a spoken or unspoken demand that the community be responsible for taking care of that person. Someone operating at Child-Level plays the role of consumer. They are not creating or sourcing communal culture. If they do contribute, their contribution comes with a should: "I *should* participate because it is expected of me." At their most accommodating, they are being adaptive to a culture defined by others. At their most disruptive, they complain, but don't turn these complaints into proposals or initiatives. If they did, they would already be operating at higher levels of responsibility. For someone operating at this level, responsibility is overwhelming, burdensome, or stupid.

Going down from Child-Level of Responsibility, we encounter **Zero-Level of Responsibility**. At Zero-Level are people who are either psychologically incapable or have forfeited their claim to taking responsibility. In modern culture, such people end up under psychiatric care or in prisons where nearly everything—their schedules, their rooms, their diets, the opportunities available to them—is decided by someone else. People operating at Zero-Level of Responsibility rarely end up in communities unless the project is specifically designed around caring for such people.

Moving up from Child-Level, we arrive at **Adult-Level of Responsibility**. Here responsibility is characterized by fairness. Operating at this level means you clean up the messes you make and take care of your needs, but that's it. You do your part—no more and no less. You might make proposals or come up with ideas, but at the core, these proposals and ideas are primarily about you nourishing and taking care of yourself or your children. Others might benefit, but that isn't the point.



Saoirse Kitterman



John Loomis



Cara Wilson

High-Level of Responsibility is where notions of fairness go out the window, and a larger authentic generosity comes into play. Yes, you clean up the messes you make, but you also notice and decide to take responsibility for messes that you did not create. You do not do this because of a *should* or because, "If I don't do it, no one else will!" You are not a victim of responsibility! At High-Level, you clean up messes because you *want* to, because you are inspired to, because you are delighted to. Operating at a High-Level of Responsibility in a community means you are at source, actively shaping and creating the culture where you and others thrive.

In **Radical-Level of Responsibility** fairness is irrelevant, which also leaves behind reasonability. At a Radical-Level of Responsibility you walk with the clarity that all messes are your responsibility, and that at any time you can become the source and creator of anything that you treasure in life. Here, responsibility is about pure creation and awareness in action. At this level, your life becomes about being in ecstatic service to your stand and commitment (seen in a few spiritual communities) for something far bigger than yourself to exist in the world—without overwhelm, without pressure, without knowing or even *needing* to know how. Taking responsibility at this level creates transformational and initiatory doorways for you, for others, and for the world.

And now...to the dishes!

Zero-Level: Dishes?

Your dish arrives with spaghetti. You eat the spaghetti. Someone takes the dish away. Where do they take the dish? Not your problem.

You did not choose the food. You did not choose the hour of eating. You did not buy the ingredients. You did not prepare the food. You did not have any say about this food. You ate the food. When the food was gone, you did not remove your dish. It was removed for you. You did not clean the dish. The dish was cleaned for you.

Child-Level: A Dish of Adaptation and Tantrums

You've eaten your spaghetti. Mmm, yummy. Now what? Well, maybe you leave your dish there, at the table. Or in the living room. After all, you've done it before. No one knew it was yours. Eventually someone will come along and clean it up. Besides, there are enough people here using enough dishes, no one would even *know* it was yours. You'd never have to admit it.

But then, the agreement is: Everyone does their own dishes. Ugh. Well, if you are going to be a good communitarian (and you *should* strive for that, right?) then you ought to clean your dish. Yes, that is the good and right thing to do...

But, isn't it kind of a dumb rule? And who came up with it anyway? Having dishes lying around doesn't bother you, and doing dishes sucks! Someone should buy a dishwasher. Then *we* wouldn't have to do all these dishes. Why doesn't someone propose that? I mean, surely there's enough extra money lying around in the community to get a dishwasher. And if there isn't, then someone could petition the landlord. Yeah. That's what *someone* should do.

Okay. The dish is still in front of you. Hmm. Maybe you could do it later. That's it, you'll go to the store first, buy some gummies, maybe take a little walk. Then you'll come back and get to it. Surely you won't forget about it...

Before that, you decide to peek in the kitchen. Ah, just as you suspected! Other people have left dishes behind. A big anonymous mess! Well, if they're not doing their dishes, why should you?

Adult-Level: You Do Your Dish, I Do Mine

That was some good spaghetti. Yum! Now, you clean up. After all, we agreed: Everybody cleans up after themselves.

Hmm, you see that other people have left their dirty dishes behind. Tsk, tsk. That's not what we agreed to! Ah, well, at

least you're keeping your end of the bargain, even if they are not.

You spot some tomato sauce you spilled on the floor. You clean that up, too. You go get the mop, and...oh! Someone didn't empty the recycling. It was Nancy's turn. She's away this weekend and didn't ask anyone to replace her. What a mess. What is that thing Nancy always says? "Not my circus, not my monkey?" Well, not your mess, not your job to clean. You can't go around cleaning other people's messes. You're not their slave. You leave the recycling there, and bring it up at the next house meeting, so she can be accountable. Fair is fair.

High-Level: A Dish of Love

Good spaghetti! Dish time. Here we go!

Well, here you are, doing your dishes. Everyone else has done or is doing their dishes, which is fine. But gosh, do you really care about dishes being done? Well, yes, and...something else is possible. You moved into community to create more love, more connection, more collaboration, and more togetherness in your life. How come dishes are not part of that too?

You realize you've been thinking WAY too small. The entire community has been thinking too small. You have been doing the dishes as if doing the dishes is *only* about doing the dishes. You realize that dishes could be about something else. They could be a doorway to unfold more of what you and others want as a community. It could be about having wild conversations together. How would that go? So much of family life revolves around the kitchen, which means many people have old wounds connected to family kitchens. Could dish-doing become a healing space? What if every dish left behind became an opportunity for intimacy and forgiveness? What if doing the dishes even became a time when it's not just the dishes that sparkle, but the people who sparkle, their uniqueness beckoned forth as they scrub each plate clean? What if cleaning a plate was about loving a plate in such a way that when the next person ate from it, they were eating love? Could cleaning dishes become such a thrilling activity that nobody wanted to miss it?

These are great ideas! But ideas don't grow legs until someone proposes something. And you're the one with these ideas. Feeling fear, you decide to propose holding space for this experiment to happen. But what to call this dishes space? "New Dish-Doing" doesn't quite sizzle... Ha! You delightfully call it: A Dish of Love! Because that is what the experiment would be about: Love. The dishes are cleaned in a field of love, by people loving each other. You decide to practice right now with the people around you.

Radical-Level: A Dish of Service

...continued from High-Level Responsibility

A Dish of Love has evolved. You realize that this space turns people's souls on. Most of the time, so many people show up that there isn't space for everyone to clean dishes, so half the people are simply there, contributing with their hearts and creativity to the space. Meanwhile, the dishes get done, but you rarely leave the kitchen when the dishes are done. It's just too precious.

You are no longer the only one thinking up experiments. You are seeing others' genius and new talents unfold, also proposing exercises for love and dishes. It's ecstatic!

You can clearly see the potential of this space. You radically commit to invoking that potential into life. You do not let *not knowing how* stop you. Commitment comes first, the *how* comes later, with every experiment you try. The experiment you have been practicing for the last weeks as you have been washing dishes is to refuse to believe anyone's limiting beliefs about themselves and invoke the brightest gifts in each person, with each interaction you have. This has extended beyond A Dish of Love to all daily encounters, even with the postal carrier. There is a new kind of brightness turning on in you and in others, like a clear sense of mission and purpose in life. A Dish of Love is rippling outwards, sparking Love in all areas around you. The whole community is changing!

You begin writing down your discoveries about how to create more love and aliveness, and sharing the gold with other communities and beyond. Students at a nearby university catch wind of what you are up to and decide to interview you. Soon, you



Saoirse Kitterman



Cara Wilson

are inviting others to your home to A Dish of Love so they can learn to hold space for the same magic you do. One visitor challenges you to write an article sharing your learnings in Communities, so that more people can find out about these incredible treasures and inspire other communities to do the same.

One day, it occurs to you: If you are the only person holding space for A Dish of Love, then you cannot do what's next for you. Also, what if you get sick, or leave the community? Does A Dish of Love end, too? Hmm. You decide to make this thing outlast you. You decide to train others. You need to make sure they do this job as well as you do. But why limit training to your level of competence? Instead, train them to hold space better than you do, and train them to train others. That's how you replace yourself! In this way, what started with you and your community extends far beyond you and your community. It grows wings, and the whole world benefits!

Further Considerations

Dishes don't have to be about dishes, and neither does this article. It is possible to take any domain in your community—finances, guests, leadership, events, conflict, childrearing, pets, intimacy, food, patriarchy, sexuality, etc.—and run it through the different Levels of Responsibility.

No Level of Responsibility is better or worse than any other, but each level does create different community cultures. Few communities operate at a consciously agreed-to Level of Responsibility. This has consequences. Mixed-responsibility communities often have more conflicts because the only common playing ground of collaboration is the lowest common denominator—the lowest Level of Responsibility.

No matter where you are currently practicing, it is possible to bootstrap yourself and learn to take higher levels of responsibility. Experiments for becoming more responsible are endless, but here are a few you might start with:

- **Belonging:** Consider that instead of others' being in any way responsible for your sense of belonging, you are. Belonging comes only from you. What kind of doors would this open in your life?
- **Drama:** Consider that if you are in any kind of drama with someone, you sourced that drama. How did you practically allow it or help create it? What did you unconsciously choose to ignore or were naive about? What pay-offs do you get from experiencing this drama? Reflect on that in depth. Now, what do you want to create instead? Commit to spending one month creating only that.
- **There is no "We" in responsibility:** What if authentic responsibility were a free, creative choice and a genuine expression of natural love and generosity? Then it could not be imposed upon anyone. How would you collaborate if this were the case? How would you take care of yourself around other people not taking responsibility? What would you try on?

If you try out these experiments, share what you discover!

Vera Franco is a creator and a designer of communities and cultures. After spending a decade living in Findhorn Ecovillage facilitating Ecovillage Design and holistic learning spaces, she is mostly turned on about people and communities that are centered around personal and societal transformation. She has co-created a few temporary experimental communities of practice, is part of a nomadic Nanonation called Possibilica, and travels the world delivering Authentic Adulthood Initiations contexted in Radical Responsibility, so that women and men can grow into their extraordinary nature and create the cultures and playgrounds their hearts and souls need. Reach out to her at veralfranco@gmail.com.

Devin Gleeson is a communitarian. As a cofounder, he has been especially interested in building communities that act as transformational and evolutionary crucibles for the benefit of individuals and the world. These days, he travels around the globe delivering Expand the Box trainings and other Possibility Management work to support people in growing up and taking more responsibility for creating the cultures they long to live in. Contact him at devingleeson4@gmail.com.

Dish Karma

By Eric Wolf

Last month you forgot
your dishes.
They were a mess—a real piece
of work.
Someone cleaned them all.
Every one.

They even cleaned the oily pots.
The dried plates.
The dirty spoons.
Your old plastic bin of smelly
leftovers you didn't use.

Today that person has left a
dirty dish in the sink.
They will find it in the morning
They will feel a sense of dish
shame.
Normally they are so on it.

Here is your opportunity to
give a gift.
To care for another
To pay your Dish Karma
To save another from the Law
of Dish Dharma.

So the dish sits there waiting
your decision.
How much does it cost you?
How much does it give?
To lift another's Dish Karma.

Eric Wolf is a dyslexic storyteller and narrative therapist in Hawaii. In 2024 he published A Field Guide to Narrative Therapy. *You can learn more about Eric at www.ericwolf.org.*

Chairs, Tables, and the Order–Chaos Balance

By Sharon Villines

There are many messages in the cohousing listserv archives (cohousing-l) about tables, particularly, and chairs. People have found many solutions but not the perfect solution. Many factors affect the use of tables: Is the dining room open to the rest of the common house or its own room? Do you want to have a homey look or a well-ordered look? Do you plan to move the tables and chairs often so the room can be used for other things or do you have a dedicated space?

How the room will be used is a guessing game until one to three years after move-in. Some uses will turn out to be too much work, and others will find no participants. It's trial and error.

Donated Tables: You will probably need to use tablecloths since they will be in various conditions, colors, sizes, etc. It can produce a very homey look at minimum cost.



Chris Roth

Purchased Commercial Tables: Use a distributor that deals with institutions before you close on units. A good dealer will have lots of information about what is available at what cost and expected useful life. This also allows you to include the cost in the unit sales price and thus in mortgages.

Trade-offs:

- Sturdy with no wobble vs. light enough for one person to move
- Sturdy but folding so they can be stacked to the side of the room or placed on a cart to be removed from the room
- Round tables that were easier to seat different numbers of people or modular rectangle so they could be variously arranged
- Cost for sturdiness balanced with cost for appearance and ease of moving
- Large or small or a combination

For more than 15 years, I was the person at Takoma Village who almost daily neatened up the tables and chairs in the dining area of our largest room, so I know what each of these trade-offs means. I learned two things from repeated lessons:

1. Some people liked one long table, and others liked smaller tables, but the long table was always used first. No matter how I arranged the tables, at least one long table always reappeared as if by magic. It would seat 15 to 20 people. And most often, the other tables seating four or six would be arranged as additional long tables. For years, the norm was three long tables.

2. Smaller tables seating four to eight produced quieter mealtimes, but people didn't like it. People came to dinner as individuals who would decide who to sit next to or which table to join. With small tables, people were too divided. And if the meal was served "family style" with the serving bowls on the table, there were too many serving bowls to fill and distribute.

During meals, as soon as I opened the door from the hallway to the dining room, I knew how the tables were set up. If it sounded more like a football game, the tables were arranged as long tables. If the voices were at conversation level, the tables were arranged individually. Some people wanted the tables to always be arranged as individual tables, but attempts to do this never lasted.

After years of use and as the meals became more frequent, the standard became one medium-long table seating 10 to 15 people and other tables seating eight to 10.

Whether households with children or couples sat together varied over time, depending on the household.

I was in favor of a kids' table, maybe with one adult supervising, but it was viewed by most as a negative thing—as an exclusion of kids. I thought it would be a good idea to build a kid culture of finishing meals and eating all the vegetables, but it was a continent too far.

One more memory: when a six-year-old who had been living in Europe for two years returned, the dining room tables had been stacked along one wall to discourage gatherings during COVID. Their immediate reaction when they entered the dining room was, "Don't these people know how things are supposed to be? Who is in charge of this?" We are often not aware that children, as well as adults, are attached to the Common House and often don't welcome changes. How the tables are arranged and what kinds of coverings they have become part of the feeling of home.

Following 25 years in cohousing at Takoma Village, Washington DC, Sharon Villines now resides in a senior living community at Riderwood Village, Silver Spring, Maryland. This article is adapted from her post to the cohousing listserv (see lists.cohousing.org/mailman/listinfo/cohousing-l) on February 10, 2026.

Community of Technical Debt: Knowledge, Memory, and the Governance Gap

By Joshua Bechtel

Introduction: A Failure Mode Without Fireworks

The most dramatic threats to intentional communities are well documented in the literature: financial collapse, ideological fracture, charismatic authority gone wrong. These are the crises that generate postmortems.

But there is a quieter failure mode, one that rarely produces a definitive moment of rupture. It arrives not with a bang but with a slow, almost imperceptible stiffening; often hidden behind one or more of the other failure modes. The community continues to exist. Meetings still happen. Decisions still get made. And yet something has gone structurally wrong, and the evidence does not surface until a generation later, when the people who "just knew how things worked" are no longer around to know them.

This article is about that failure mode: the community that refuses, gently but persistently, to write itself down.

The Organic Architecture Problem

Intentional communities are, by design, alternatives to conventional institutional life. This is one of their great strengths. Founding members often build with remarkable efficiency, solving problems in real time through conversation, trust, and a shared framework of values that makes explicit rules feel redundant.

The resulting architecture is real, but it is invisible. Responsibilities are assumed rather than assigned. Decision-making authority flows through relationships rather than roles. Processes exist, but only as behavioral patterns, not recorded procedures.

Organizational theorists would recognize this as a form of "tacit knowledge" dependency, a term originally developed by philosopher Michael Polanyi to describe expertise that is genuine and functional but essentially uncodifiable by its holder. A master craftsperson knows how to shape a bowl in ways they cannot fully articulate. A founding community member knows how things work in ways they have never been asked to explain.

The problem, as Polanyi himself noted, is that tacit knowledge does not transfer easily. And communities, unlike craft workshops, eventually have to function without their original practitioners.

The Sociology of Resistance

When newer members or younger generations attempt to introduce documentation, structured governance, or clearer role definitions, they routinely encounter resistance. What is notable is how consistent the character of that resistance tends to be across otherwise very different communities.

It is rarely aggressive. It is persistent.

The objections surface in a recognizable family of forms: formalization will reduce autonomy; written rules will calcify what should remain flexible; governance structures will import the very hierarchies the community was founded to escape. Underlying these specific objections is a more general, if unspoken, premise: that the spirit of the community and its operational systems are in tension, and that protecting the former requires resisting the latter.

This is, on its face, a coherent position. Communities do develop cultures, and cultures can be genuine. The concern that bureaucratization might flatten or distort communal life is not irrational.

But it tends to carry a hidden assumption: that the current informal system is neutral, while any proposed formal system would be an imposition. In practice, informal systems are not neutral. They encode the preferences, habits, and authority of whoever built them. They simply do so invisibly, which makes them harder to interrogate and easier to naturalize.

"That's just how we've always done it" is not a description of a value-free system. It is a description of a system whose values have been successfully insulated from scrutiny.

When Governance Becomes Personality

Without documentation, institutional memory concentrates in individuals. This is not, in the short term, catastrophic. Communities have always relied on experienced members to hold collective knowledge. The difficulty is that this arrangement has structural consequences that compound over time.

When decisions are not recorded, they cannot be revisited with shared reference. When roles are not defined, accountability becomes a matter of social pressure rather than agreed obligation. When processes exist only in memory, they become subject to the ordinary distortions of memory: selective recall, motivated interpretation, and simple forgetting.

The practical result is what might be called governance by personality. Those with long tenure hold disproportionate influence, not because their authority has been formally conferred or democratically legitimized, but because they are

the only ones who know how anything works. Newer members may participate in the visible rituals of community life while remaining structurally excluded from its operational logic.

This is not usually anyone's intention. It is an emergent property of the system itself.

The Generational Transition as Stress Test

Every community eventually encounters a moment that functions as a stress test for its institutional resilience: the generational transition. Founding members step back. The people who carried the informal system in their heads reduce their involvement, or depart entirely.

At this point, the absence of documentation is no longer a latent structural problem. It is an acute operational one.

Incoming members and the next generation of leaders inherit not a framework but a set of fragments: partial knowledge, unwritten expectations, and processes whose original rationale has never been articulated. The result is predictable. Responsibilities are missed, not out of indifference, but because no one agreed who held them. Decisions are re-litigated, not out of obstinacy, but because no record exists of having made them before. Effort is duplicated in some areas and neglected in others, because the map of the territory was never drawn.

The irony here is sharp. Communities that prioritize sustainability, resilience, and long-term thinking often find themselves structurally unprepared for the one transition they could see coming from the beginning.

Reframing the Stakes

The conventional case for documentation in organizational contexts tends to emphasize efficiency: written processes reduce errors, save time, support onboarding. These are real benefits, but they are not quite the right argument for communities, whose core concerns are often elsewhere.

The more compelling case is about equity and participation.

When institutional knowledge is unwritten, access to it is uneven. Members with long tenure, existing social connections to founders, or the social capital to ask persistent questions have far greater access to how things actually work than members who are newer, quieter, or less enmeshed in the community's informal networks. Documentation is not a technocratic imposition on communal life. It is a mechanism for distributing communal life more fairly.

Similarly, the case for governance clarity is not primarily about efficiency. It is about trust. When roles are defined, members can rely on each other in ways that informal arrangements make structurally uncertain. When decisions are recorded, the community can build a relationship with its own history rather than arguing about what was decided and by whom.

Clarity, in this frame, is not the enemy of community. It is one of the conditions under which community becomes possible for everyone, not just those who happened to be present at the founding.

Conclusion: What Goes Unwritten Is Destined to Be Lost

There is a distinction worth preserving in closing. The argument here is not that intentional communities should adopt the governance structures of corporations, nonprofits, or bureaucratic institutions. Communities have legitimate reasons to organize differently, and much of what makes them valuable is precisely that difference.

The argument is narrower and perhaps more important: that the knowledge a community needs to function should not be stored exclusively in the memories of its founding generation.

Communities, like all human institutions, tell stories about themselves. Some tell those stories in documents, processes, and shared understanding that survive the departure of any individual member. Others tell them only in memory.

The second kind of story is often richer, more textured, and more alive. It is also the kind that ends, as the lights that kept the community aware of and seeking those goals slowly fade to black, as the community gets reinvented by the next generations.

Joshua Bechtel is a content architect and knowledge systems strategist with 20+ years of experience helping teams structure, govern, and deliver information at scale. He's also an active member of the Miccosukee Land Cooperative (MLC; miccosukeelandcoop.net), where he applies that same lens to community documentation, governance, and shared systems, including MLC's publication, The Alternate Current. *He writes at the intersection of technology, governance, and human systems, with a particular interest in how organizations preserve and pass on institutional knowledge (see joshwritingsamples.com).*



Miccosukee Land Cooperative Community Center.

Joshua Bechtel

Consensus vs. Sociocracy?

By Kavana Tree Bressen



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*Note: This piece is written in conversation with "Clarifying Consensus" by Marty Klaif (*Communities *#210, Spring 2026) and "Consensus and Sociocracy—Explained" by Jerry Koch-Gonzalez and Ted Rau (*Communities *#204, Fall 2024), as well as years of debates in these pages and elsewhere.*

I have read dozens of articles on sociocracy over the years. They habitually take things people don't like about unrealistic or poorly run group process and label that as consensus, while envisioning an idealized state of group process and asserting it's the result of sociocracy. While i have found that repeated rhetorical ploy very annoying, i aim here to go one level deeper. Sociocracy is not some stand-alone, independently created process—it's simply one version among many of consensus process.

Here's a little history. Gerard Endenburg, founder of the Sociocratic Center in the Netherlands, attended Beatrice Cadbury and Kees Boeke's boarding school while growing up, which ran on Quaker principles. When Endenburg took over first a division and later the whole of his parents' electronics firm, he applied those same principles to its management, recognizing from experience that better decisions would result from a more inclusive and less autocratic system of decision-making than was typical of most companies (which sadly hasn't changed a bit in the decades since).

In order to make this approach work in a setting that lacked traditional Quaker components such as strongly shared values, years of history together, and high trust, Endenburg adapted the system to a business setting. He applied knowledge of cybernetics with its focus on systematic feedback loops, emphasizing structural support through circles with "double links." Instead of waiting in silence for who felt moved to speak, they adopted go-rounds, inviting each voice in turn to ensure all had an opportunity to speak. The sociocratic lineage of consensus also came up with a thoughtful nominations process for choosing people to fill roles, so that each work group could choose its leadership.

Similarly, the dedicated activists of Movement for a New Society in the 1970s (Berit and George Lakey, Caroline Estes, and others) adapted Quaker practice into a version of consensus suitable for activist causes. Instead of searching together for the will of God, members of peace and anti-nuclear groups sought a secular "sense of the meeting," in line with a group's values and aims.

In the 1980s, CT Butler saw a need to train new representatives attending spokescouncil meetings for the Pledge of Resistance. That method needed to work at meetings in Boston typically drawing 70-100+ people (who represented members of 150 different affinity groups), not to mention withstanding pressure from potential government infiltrators. He wrote up a manual with clear steps to follow, and that became the Formal Consensus method.

These approaches vary in both theory and practice. Factors such as circle size, handling of objections, typical meeting formats, threshold of agreement (how much agreement is sufficient for a proposal to be adopted), how roles are filled, powers of the facilitator, the tone of meetings, how much authority is delegated to committees—all this and more range widely, both between approaches and within each. Yet all are part of what i call the "glorious biodiversity of consensus." Each process has its place; each adaptation arises in a specific evolutionary social context.

Years ago i had the good fortune at an event to meet Tim Hartnett, who at the time was nearing publication of *Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making*. His book essentially advocated using consensus techniques to refine a proposal, then voting on it. I was taken aback, and worried about a book coming out (from New Society Press, of all places!) that used the term "consensus" while basically arguing against actually using it as a decision rule. Tim and i held a vigorous, impassioned, lively debate, attended by onlookers who would happily have been eating popcorn had any been on hand. Life went on. Some years later, the Occupy movement arose, and i watched General Assemblies in city after city enact what Tim had advocated for. While most of those participants never read that book, it turned out he was pointing at a method needed in certain times and places.

Like Marty, i am exasperated by years of sociocracy practitioners making specious statements about the consensus process he and i learned from elders in the communities movement, in an attempt to differentiate their version from that one. There's really no need, folks! We're all part of a big extended family. Instead of getting lost in biased comparisons, stuck in the mire of "this version good, that version bad," i invite fellow practitioners to get curious together, learn about all the possibilities, and explore which one best fits what situation. Mix and blend, choosing elements that suit your group's nature and situation.

For example, i've recommended the sociocratic nominations process to plenty of groups who aren't otherwise using a sociocratic system—i think it's a much better approach than having the first person whose hand goes up fill a role. However, i'm not a fan of go-rounds as a primary meeting format; because most of the groups i facilitate have about two dozen people in the room, there are lots of other formats that generally work better, so i save rounds for special occasions. Rounds obviously wouldn't have made sense at the Boston Pledge of Resistance meetings with 70-100+ people either. The "Meeting Formats" list on my website has over 30 options to choose from, providing groups with plenty of possibilities.

Having spent a lot of time talking with proponents of sociocracy when people around me first got excited about it, i did eventually get clear what they were aiming at. Because most of what they first offered was so frustratingly inaccurate, it took a while to sort through all that and get down to it. **I learned that what people were really after was a process where the default answer was "yes" rather than "no."**

For example, according to the Formal Consensus method, once a proposal is made, all possible objections are listed, and



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then addressed before anything else can happen—no wonder folks get worn out! People tired of dealing with "sticks in the mud" are hungry for more problems solved, higher autonomy, and faster resolutions. While i agree that a healthy balance between freedom and security is indeed a worthy goal, i think the pathway to get there has more to do with the culture and vibe of a group's decision-making process than what name it goes by. Classical consensus facilitators have been using the phrase, "Can you live with it?" for decades before the sociocratic slogan "Good enough for now, safe enough to try" was coined; both phrases point to the need for individual members to make peace with a proposal that is not perfect or may not be entirely to their liking.

I appreciated that Marty's article in issue #210 addressed several of the major inaccuracies in Jerry and Ted's article from issue #204 regarding conventional consensus process. One inaccuracy Marty didn't take up is the distinction between abstention vs. standing aside. Jerry and Ted seem to think these are one and the same, and to be fair, this misconception is not uncommon. They disallow both, which i do not advise. Just like at any city council that uses majority vote, abstaining from a consensus process means not participating in making the decision, for example due to conflict of interest. I think that's an appropriate option to include.

Standing aside, however, is unique to consensus, and arises from the Quaker tradition. Since blocking (what sociocracy terms "a reasoned and paramount objection") is reserved for major concerns that a proposal either crosses a group's stated values or would cause catastrophic impact, standing aside is the place to go for someone who disagrees or doesn't like the proposal, or if it violates their personal values. It serves a critical function by providing the opportunity for a member to register significant dissent, while allowing the group to proceed. Personally i think it's a brilliant innovation, and many groups would benefit from more knowledge of it. Traditionally, someone who stands aside does not lead implementation of a proposal, yet they are still bound to follow the decision like any other member. Their name and reasoning are recorded in the minutes, which ensures the group slowed down sufficiently to listen to and consider their concern (not to mention it enables the person to say "I told you so" later, if so inclined).

While distinctive labels can sometimes be helpful, just because this one form of consensus practice has a name, "sociocracy," that doesn't include the word "consensus," doesn't mean it's not. And in real life, just as there are communities who say they operate by consensus while holding meetings that feel pressured like majority voting, and boards of directors who technically use Robert's Rules of Order while carefully arriving at consensus before a vote is ever called, there are also attributes assigned to sociocratic and/or nonsociocratic consensus that may or may not show up in organizations who say they are practicing one or the other version.

If it's any consolation, the struggles and tensions we experience around process arguments are nothing new. The small collective who wrote *Building United Judgment* (a fundamental guide to consensus process since 1981) had so much trouble coming to agreement among themselves on how to handle the concept of blocking while writing the book they almost broke up over it! The authors finally agreed to present alternative views side-by-side, including the story of what happened as an additional sidebar case study—an elegant and lovely solution, yes?

Processes will no doubt continue to evolve and proliferate, and that's a good thing. It behooves us to remain open-minded, and shift as needed.

Blessed with a calling to help groups function well, Kavana Tree Bressen lived in community for over a decade and has served hundreds of organizations, including more than 75 intentional communities. She's available to assist with healthy governance, community retreats, and facilitating groups through sticky situations, and is also able to offer some coaching and support from afar. See her website www.effectivecollective.net for more information, including the "Meeting Formats" list mentioned above. Kavana prefers to use a lower-case "i" in writing, as a reminder that she as the author is no more or less important than "you" or "them."

The "Pushers" and the "Stoppers"

Community Conflict and the Bell-Shaped Curve

By Diana Leafe Christian

Over the more than 30 years I've studied communities and lived in shared group households, a forming community, and more than two decades living in an ecovillage, I've observed a pattern I call the "Bell-Shaped Curve of Community"—a model of people's different kinds of influence in their community.

The Bell-Shaped Curve model is only a working hypothesis, and related to my article series "Working Effectively with Especially Challenging Behaviors" (Communities #193, #194, #196, #197, #198, #200, #201, #203; see "How This Model Relates to Especially Challenging Behaviors" page 43).

In this model most community members are in what I call the "Middle." People at each end of the curve I call "Pushers" and "Stoppers."

Communities Using Consensus

The Bell-Shaped Curve model applies to communities using consensus. If the group uses classic, traditional consensus, members can block a proposal for what they may see as the good of the community. Stoppers are community members who often block proposals.

In communities using a modified form of consensus with an effective recourse for blocks, Stoppers can slow down decisions with many concerns and questions, but cannot stop proposals as easily.

And if a group uses Sociocracy, the Bell-Shaped Curve model doesn't seem to apply. When a community uses this self-governance method, both Pushers and Stoppers have less power, as power is distributed more widely across the group. This is one of the reasons I highly recommend Sociocracy self-governance for communities.

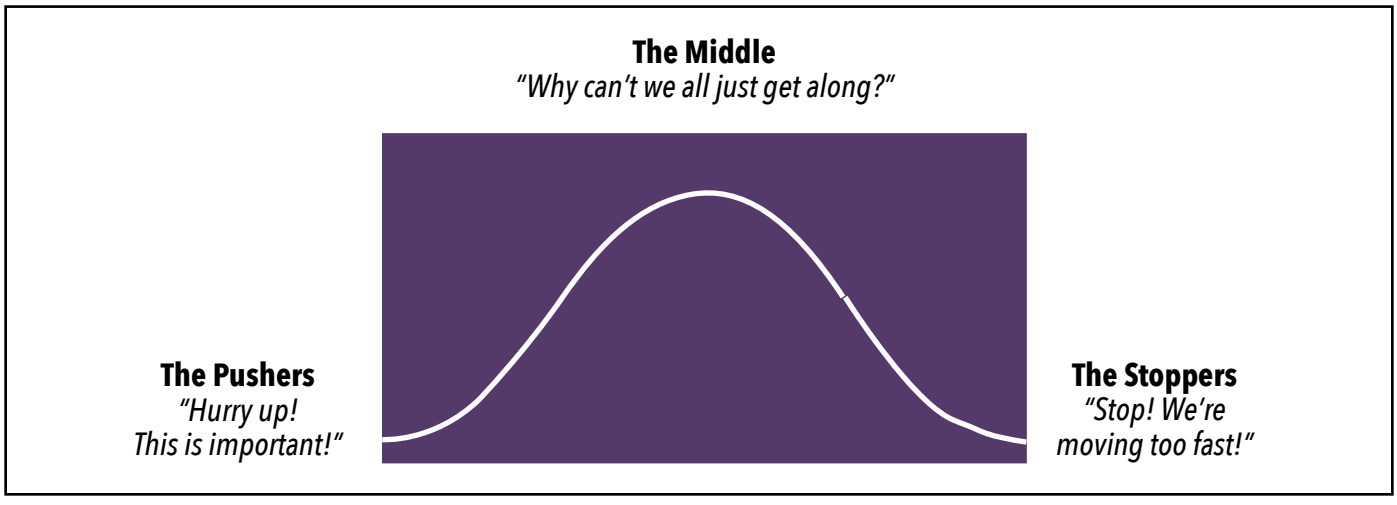
So let's see how this model can apply to communities using consensus.

The Pushers

The "Pushers," at one end of the curve, are relatively few people in any community. They seem to be especially confident, articulate, and self-empowered, and usually got good grades in school. They often see several different levels and layers of community situations and their likely outcomes. They often see opportunities and challenges for the community two to three years before others. On the Myers-Briggs scale they are frequently "NT" (the scale's Intuition and Thinking, rather than Sensing and Feeling characteristics). The behavior of some Pushers can be impatient and pushy. Sometimes even arrogant.

The Pushers want to help the group by helping it achieve its goals and move forward towards its Mission and Purpose. They're doers. They're the community members who tend to start cottage industries, focalize committees, and make proposals in business meetings. They think fast and move fast. Their motto might be, "Let's *do* it!"

They can sometimes be seen as radical and intense, and experienced sometimes as intimidating, even overwhelming. Their "Can Do" attitude, while inspiring to some, can annoy or even scare others. When they propose innovations, most others often feel uncomfortable and don't support their ideas at that point; their ideas seem too new, too radical, too "out of the blue." When Pushers point out a problem in the community, other members often don't believe them. Others are often annoyed to listen to a Pusher's description of what seems to the Pusher like a problem, but doesn't seem





Pushers are confident, articulate, self-empowered, often impatient "doers" who want their community to move faster to achieve its goals.

that way to anyone else. It may take most community members two to three years to see community problems a Pusher sees sooner and wants to solve now.

Pushers tend to immediately understand each other, but they don't tend to understand Stoppers or the Middle.

Some but not all Pushers don't have especially good communication skills, and they may not see the value of cultivating these skills.

Pushers usually feel fine about themselves, at least consciously. Some may have unhandled and probably unconscious emotional distress which they express by pushing toward action and innovation. When slowed down or stopped, they express their frustration—or unconscious emotional pain—in impatience and anger toward and even disdain for those who slow down or stop them.

Pushers don't tend to seek therapy or counseling for their inner issues because, first, they probably aren't aware of their inner issues, and second, because they just want to get on with creating their projects and helping the community fulfill its goals. They usually don't think of themselves as having a problem, though they're often quick to point out others' faults. While they feel self-empowered and make things happen, if they're in emotional pain it's so suppressed they may not feel it—they're too busy making things happen. Or perhaps they push things to happen *because* they're distracting themselves from emotional pain.

If they run into obstacles too often, they can get angry. And finally, heartbroken. If their anger and heartbreak goes on too long they can become bitter and cynical and finally stop attending community meals, going to meetings, and participating in social events. Or they just up and leave the group altogether.

If Pushers did get outside healing help to soften their impatience, learn good communication skills, and create emotional rapport with people in the Middle, they could become effective and even visionary community leaders, and everyone in the community would benefit. (More on this below.) I know of a small, very successful community on the West Coast comprised of mostly self-empowered, confident, smart systems thinkers—Pushers—and a few members who seem like the Middle. However, *this* community's Pushers have good communication skills. Most of them are former directors or high-level staff of successful nonprofit organizations and *had* to learn good communication skills to perform their roles successfully. Theirs is one of the most functional and successful communities I've seen, I think because their Pushers balance their make-it-happen energy with savvy people know-how.

I believe Pushers can't help feeling the way they do, feeling compelled to push the community to fulfill its goals. They're doing their best to help the community—in their case, meaning to help their community achieve its goals.

Pushers are usually misunderstood by the Stoppers, who fear them, and the Middle, who are baffled by them.

The Stoppers

In this Bell-Shaped Curve working hypothesis, the motto of people I call Stoppers might be, "Stop! We're moving too *fast!*" In contrast to Pushers they can feel an inner compulsion to slow things down or even stop the community's progress towards its goals when a proposal or project seems to be moving forward uncomfortably fast and their inner "danger" antennae go on high alert.

Stoppers often feel compelled to protect the community from proposals or projects they perceive as a threat. Or which they perceive as impossible, impractical, or too expensive. Pushers believe "We can do this!" Stopper's believe "We shouldn't do this yet, and we *can't* do it!"

Stoppers tend to feel intimidated by or angered by the fast-thinking, fast-moving Pushers. They want to protect the group from the Pushers, whom they can perceive as threatening, even dangerous. When Pushers introduce new or innovative ideas, Stoppers often shift into high-gear protection mode. Their self-image might be, "I protect the community from harm." (And in ecovillages, "I protect the Earth.")

Some community members who tend to process new ideas or information slowly do so because of a natural inclination to ponder issues deeply over a period of time, often emerging with truly helpful new insights or strategies. But Stoppers put the brakes on, I believe, not because they consider ideas deeply and slowly, but because they may be


Nils Rasmussen


Micah & Sammie Chaffin


Pulkit Pithva

Pushers initiate projects, take risks, and take on challenges.

afraid of change, afraid of moving forward faster than they can process new ideas. They may seem hesitant or unconfident to Pushers and to many of the Middle. But to other Stoppers, their allies in resisting "dangerous" projects or proposals, they are loyal warriors protecting the community from harm—Heroes! While Stoppers don't usually show leadership and often personally feel powerless, if the community uses classical, traditional consensus Stoppers actually *do* wield a lot of power because of the projects or proposals they can slow down or stop that everyone else wants. They slow proposals down by expressing many concerns and forebodings and/or outright blocking them.

In mainstream culture they usually experience themselves as marginalized and ineffective. But in intentional communities using classic, traditional consensus and even modified consensus, *Stoppers are the most powerful people in the group*—because they can consistently slow down or block what everyone else wants.

Many though not all Stoppers exhibit what I call in my above-cited article series "especially challenging behaviors," although of course some Pushers can have these behaviors too. Behaviors such as frequently and consistently—not just once in a while—acting out in meetings, halting conversations with angry outbursts, speaking harshly or unkindly, and sometimes, in contrast, acting as disempowered victims—victimized by other people or by the community itself. They are often easily triggered, and for what can seem to others with relatively little cause, and so are seen as touchy and over-sensitive. They often perceive other community members, who may simply disagree with them, as "attacking" them. Sometimes in meetings they express their distress in biting rage, bringing the meeting to a halt.

Like Pushers, Stoppers don't tend to seek outside healing help like therapy or counseling, which they can believe is insulting to even contemplate. They sometimes self-medicate with alcohol or drugs.

And like Pushers, Stoppers are often quite intelligent. However it can be hard to tell, as any mental sharpness may be overshadowed by their frequent emotional distress.

I believe Stoppers can't help feeling the

How This Model Relates to Especially Challenging Behaviors

In my experience, most Stoppers and some Pushers can have the clusters of behaviors I described in my article series, "Working Effectively with Especially Challenging Behaviors" (2021-2024). Most people I describe this way express only *some* of the following characteristics:

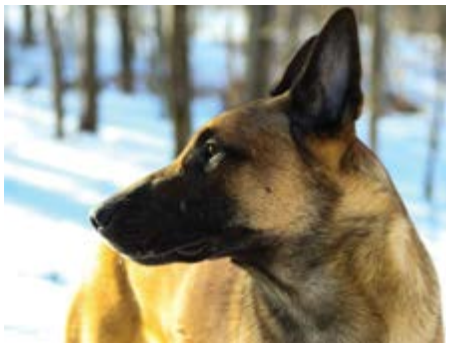
More Obvious, Overt, Extroverted Especially Challenging Behaviors *(Grandiosity on the outside, insecurity on the inside)*	**Less Obvious, Covert, Introverted Especially Challenging Behaviors** *(Insecurity on the outside, grandiosity on the inside)*
Delusions of superiority; self-centeredness	Delusions of superiority; self-centeredness
Entitlement	Impaired empathy
Impaired empathy	Relishing vengeance
Lying; exaggerating accomplishments	Manipulating others; using people
Rapidly escalating anger; sudden angry outbursts	Hypersensitivity to criticism
Grandiosity	Projecting their behaviors and attitudes onto others
Craving attention	"Gaslighting" others (telling someone what they directly observed didn't actually happen)
Criticizing others	Envying others; resenting others
Mocking or jeering at others	Limited self-awareness
Invalidating, demeaning, or belittling others	"Grooming" newer or less confident members to be their allies and support their version of reality
Bullying others	Usually cannot change or benefit from outside help
Usually cannot change or benefit from therapeutic help	

In my opinion, the community members described in the article series fit into these general categories:

Pushers	**Stoppers**
• **Dwight**, the "young superstar," often initiated projects at his community. (First article.)	• **Olive**, both aggressor and victim. My community finally had the courage (was finally fed up enough) with her disruptive meeting behavior that we set limits and boundaries on her meeting participation. (First, fourth, sixth articles.)
• **Mavis**, the "community bully," initiated many projects at her community. (First, eighth articles.)	• **Griswald**, who wreaked vengeance on his community when he could no longer stop a proposal everyone else wanted. (Second article.)
• **Andraste**, a brilliant initiator of projects in our small forming community. (Fourth article.)	• **Eldred**, responding with resentment and hatred when a new member, Joseph, pointed out the community's legal vulnerabilities. (Third article.)
• **Hugo**, the professor and intellectual who took on leadership roles in his community and with his stable followers, often drove away potential new members. (Fifth article.)	



Pauline Loroy



Deborah Hanst

Like Border Collies and Belgian Malinois, Pushers are smart, focused, fast, hard-working, and sometimes fierce and intimidating.



Nadine E.

Stoppers feel compelled to slow the consensus process down when they perceive a threat, such as proposals or projects moving forward too fast for their comfort.

way they do. I think they usually aren't aware of and can't control their reactions. Like the Pushers and the Majority in the Middle they're doing their best to help the community—in their case, to protect it from harm.

The Middle

In my experience, people I characterize as the Middle on the curve, the majority of community members, function fairly well most of the time. Most other members see them moving neither too fast nor too slow, but demonstrating a workable balance between innovative new ideas and healthy caution. They tend to focus on human relationships more than projects and achieving community goals, and value congeniality. Many, perhaps most, are conflict-averse; they don't want anyone to be upset. They rarely intervene to stop disruptive behaviors or call attention to difficult community issues. They tend to believe that everything will work out fine in the end, and can feel baffled by what Pushers often advocate as potential opportunities for the group to grab right now or unhandled problems to solve. Don't rock the boat. Please.

Unlike the Stoppers they do innovate, create, and support new ideas to help the community, often in the areas of social cohesion and group processing. People I've characterized as in the Middle in my community have organized trainings in Nonviolent Communication, established community cookouts, built a special Peace Garden for deep conversations and mediations, set up a weekly farmers market and coffee hour for community members and neighbors, and organized events to "Create a Culture of Beauty and Pleasure."

Middle people usually don't think globally and multi-dimensionally like Pushers. They don't tend to analyze community trends and patterns the way Pushers do. When Pushers point out issues they see as challenges or dangers to the community (for example, the behavior of Stoppers who may act out in meetings or block frequently) people in the Middle can see this as "just how they [the Stoppers] are" or "something we just have to put up with." Middle people are often annoyed and baffled by Pushers. They're distressed that Pushers aren't being more patient and compassionate. "Why can't you just be *nice*?"

Middle people can feel annoyed and frustrated by the intensity and sheer number of the Pushers' ideas. "What's your hurry?" They can feel baffled about why the Pushers don't seem to feel concerned for and more compassionate for Stoppers. Their motto might be, "Why can't we all just get along?" These are regular, nice folks—the solid core of any community.

Anger and Fear on Both Ends of the Curve

In this Bell-Shaped Curve model, as noted above, Stoppers often fear Pushers. Pushers may fear Stoppers too, but they didn't start out that way. But Pushers can grow increasingly frustrated, angry, and scared each time Stoppers stall or stop Pushers' proposed new ideas, proposals, or projects.

For a Pusher, being stopped is intolerable, like slowly having one's energy and enthusiasm drained away.

For a Stopper, being rushed and pushed is intolerable. It feels unsafe, dangerous.

For Pushers, stopping the Stoppers from continuously slowing things down or blocking proposals everyone else wants is an urgent issue of community well-being and success.

For Stoppers, stopping those nervy, arrogant Pushers is an urgent issue of community safety and security.

The relatively content Middle, however, often don't understand this conflict. They don't tend to analyze group dynamics the way the Pushers do, and they often want to avoid conflict as well, as noted above. They don't see the Stoppers as dangerous to the community because they can delay or prevent important, needed projects, but rather as having concerns, as all members do from time to time, which simply need to be worked out. But the Middle usually do see what Stoppers see, which is that those impatient, antsy, often-arrogant Pushers can be annoying and baffling.



Logan Weaver



Randy Laybourne

Stoppers can feel intimidated and angered by the fast-moving Pushers; they want to protect the community from those they see as trying to change things too fast.

Pushers can see people in the Middle as naïve and simplistic.

Who Has the Most Power? Who Gets Marginalized?

Power in the community absolutely rests with the Middle, because they're the wide majority of the community, and because of their sense of balance and proportion compared to Pushers and Stoppers. They have the power to make things happen, to take advantage of opportunities, to resolve problems, to change things. Unlike Pushers or Stoppers, when community members in the Middle express strong opinions or emotions about something or advocate for something, the community actually *listens* to them. Middle people are not perceived as scary or "out there" like Pushers. They don't usually shake things up. When they *do* strongly advocate something, it's significant.



A. C.

People in the Middle are generally easy going and congenial, neither impatiently pushing the community nor trying to slow things down.

You'd think it would be the relatively few fearful and suspicious Stoppers who get marginalized. However, while they can see *themselves* as marginalized, they usually are not seen that way by the Middle, who usually go out of their way to protect, nurture, and include them. Middle people especially want to protect the Stoppers from what seems like the Pushers' irrational anger, and they often don't see the Stoppers' behaviors as disruptive. Or, if they do see it, they believe, "Well, he *did* have an awful childhood." Or, "Well, there's nothing we can do about it!"

It's usually the Pushers who get marginalized. They're seen by most of the Middle —who are often baffled by Pushers—as smart, confident, impatient troublemakers, *not* as people who could ever feel demoralized or discouraged. But discouraged and demoralized they *do* feel when continuously stopped. If they feel discouraged and demoralized long enough, as noted above, they'll withdraw from the group altogether or just pack their bags and leave. The Middle are confused by this. "Why don't you come to meetings anymore?" "Why do you want to leave the community?"

Meanwhile, the Middle feel protective of and nurturing towards the Stoppers because, while they can also feel frustrated at times, this is overridden by their empathy and compassion for the Stoppers' usually obvious suffering. But often, two or three years later (I call this the "Two-Year Rule"), even some in the Middle finally get fed up enough to see what the Pushers saw earlier, and only then attempt to curb the excessive blocking of the Stoppers or their sometimes over-the-top meeting behavior.

When community members in the Middle finally do take action, for the Pushers it may be too late. The Middle's actions are out-of-sync with the timing and needs of the Pushers.



Emiliano Vittoriosi



David Cadenas

Like rabbits and turtles, Stoppers can feel timid and hesitant with the new and unfamiliar, which they often experience as a threat

What Communities Can Do

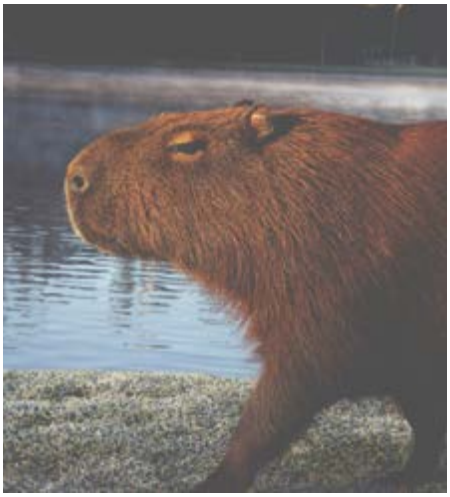
If your community is having conflict because of Pushers and Stoppers, and if your group uses classic, traditional consensus, I suggest replacing it with a modified consensus process like the N St. Consensus Method, which has a fair, equitable recourse for when people block proposals. Or with Sociocracy, a self-governance and decision-making method which in my experience has all the benefits and none of the downsides of consensus. And I encourage your group to help everyone learn a compassionate and empathetic communication style such as Nonviolent Communication (NVC) and set up a community-based Restorative Circles system, which I've found as an especially helpful process which seeks to restore relationships among group members as well as to repair any damage that may have occurred.[1]

Three Ways Pushers Can Become More Effective

Pushers can do three things to have more influence in their community (even in communities that use Sociocracy), so their ideas, projects, and proposals will be more widely understood and accepted, and to help the group's Stoppers feel more emotional safety in their presence.

To do this, Pushers first need to align themselves with the people in the Middle, by cultivating more friendships with and establishing more emotional rapport with them. This means learning to speak their


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Like the friendly Australian quokkas, People in the Middle are social and agreeable. Like capybaras they are compatible with everyone.

language—first establishing and nurturing emotional rapport, then asking people their opinions and ideas about community issues before advocating their own views. Then, as they slowly establish more trust and connection with people in the Middle, they can make suggestions, plant seeds of ideas, and attempt to co-create projects and proposals with them. Working together, they can better help their community achieve its goals, possibly sooner than it otherwise would have.

Pushers who successfully establish friendships with people in the Middle, and share their ideas and excitement with them, can then sit back, take a thoughtful listening stance in meetings, and let the Middle introduce the needed changes in the community. This works; I've seen it in my own community. We've benefited from new and beneficial projects and decisions because several of our Pushers took this initiative and collaborated with friends in the Middle.

Second, Pushers need to address any inner emotional pain that may give rise to their annoyance, impatience, or anger, and especially to any arrogance, or disdain they may feel toward the group's Stoppers. They can do this by getting outside healing help. This could include counseling or psychotherapy, or help from specialists in shamanic healing or in vibrational remedies like homeopathy and flower essences. (I'm not kidding.) Pushers can especially benefit from trauma-healing methods such as David Bercelli's Trauma Release Exercises and/or E.F.T. (Emotional Freedom Technique) therapy. Outside healing help like this can help Pushers (and everyone) feel happier and more empowered, and help people in the Middle better understand and accept their ideas and proposals. Often, however, Pushers can be too impatient, annoyed, and/or demoralized by being slowed down and thwarted by Stoppers to even consider that their own demeanor might be contributing to the problem. So while I highly recommend outside healing help for Pushers, I also recognize that only a few might actually be willing to stop blaming Stoppers and start looking within themselves. But if they do, they can accomplish wonderful things in collaboration with friends in the Middle.

(On a related note: if Stoppers got outside healing help they too could become more self-aware and empowered, and thus more effective in their community. However, in my experience, if a Stopper or Pusher also exhibits especially challenging behaviors, then the Stopper's fear and suspicion, or the Pusher's impatience and arrogance, are likely to prevent them from seeking this kind of help.)

Third, Pushers can improve their communication skills considerably by learning and consistently using Nonviolent Communication (NVC). This is simple but not easy, and takes time to learn, like learning a new language and a new set of perceptual abilities and attitudes.

Pushers can influence and benefit the community far better when they add patience, empathy, and the skills of Nonviolent Communication to their already powerful set of insights and characteristics. This takes a lot of work, but is worth it. In my experience, there's no more effective, influential person in a community than a self-empowered, innovative, kind and compassionate Pusher.

If you've seen Bell-Shaped Curve dynamics in your community, or if you see community dynamics as quite different than this model, I'd love to hear from you, either as a Letter to the Editor for Communities (editor@gen-us.net) or emailing me directly (diana@ic.org).

Diana Leafe Christian, author of Creating a Life Together *and* Finding Community*, speaks at conferences, offers consultations, and leads workshops and online trainings on creating successful new communities, resolving conflict in communities, and Sociocracy, an especially effective self-governance and decision-making method. Contact her at diana@ic.org. See www.earthaven.org/classes-and-events and ic.org/fic-courses for her upcoming online workshops.*

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1. Restorative Circles trainers for intentional communities include Alyson Ewald (alysonewald@gmail.com) and Duke Duchscherer (duked303@gmail.com).


Leo_Visions

Do you have a bell-shaped curve of attitudes and behaviors in your community? And are you a Pusher or a Stopper? Are you in the Middle?

Review BY CHRIS ROTH

Revisiting a Communal Crucible: *Surviving Zendik Farm*



Surviving Zendik Farm is a compelling new documentary about Zendik Farm Arts Cooperative, a relatively long-lived (1969-2013) radical communal experiment previously described in Lawrence Siskind's "Relationships in the Crucible" (Communities #118), in our review of Helen Zuman's book *Mating in Captivity* (Communities #179), and in that author's "A Tangled Web: Sex at Zendik Farm" (Communities #183). All three articles are well worth revisiting for further background in light of this new video. (Current subscribers can find those issues in their online SimpleCirc accounts.)[1]

Dedicated to creating a new culture based on ecological reconnection and sustainability, interpersonal intimacy, truth-telling, complete sharing, and freedom from the illusions and destructive practices of what they called the "Deathculture," the group relocated multiple times over its four-and-a-half decades, occupying a series of sites in California, Florida, Texas, North Carolina, and West Virginia. At its peak the population hovered around 60 people, though during some transitional phases it declined to as few as five or six. All told, many hundreds of people joined Zendik Farm between its founding and its dissolution, staying with it from less than a year to many decades. Cofounders Wulf and Arol Zendik died in 1999 and 2012, respectively, leaving their daughter Fawn to preside over the group's ending.

Surviving Zendik Farm states its own limited scope from the outset: "This film follows several former members who ultimately returned to the [more mainstream] world they left behind. These are personal accounts, unique to the individuals telling them, and are not intended to represent the experiences of all those who lived at Zendik Farm."

That disclaimer is important, because this is far from a comprehensive historical depiction of the group. The complete Zendik Farm archives, donated by Fawn to the Hamilton College Library, comprise nearly two dozen large banana boxes full of news reports and Zendik's own unique, abundant print, video, and audio creations. The filmmakers chose to focus mostly on historical material directly related to their present-day interviewees' own stories; the interspersed archival video clips are wide-ranging and fascinating, yet, inevitably, much is left out in these 82 minutes.

Six ex-member interviewees (Helen, Fawn, Jeanne ["Shey" at Zendik], Verd, Mazz, and Lisa ["Kaila"]) appear most frequently and provide the bulk of the in-person story, supplemented most prominently by Jeanne's daughter Thea, scholar Christian Goodwillie, and additional ex-members Cary, Obbie, and Kord. Archival footage includes extensive appearances by Wulf, Arol, Fawn, and also Thea's biological father, Chen.

"Biological" is a key qualifier here, because Zendik was committed to an alternative version of parenting that included deliberate separation between parents and their children, to break what were seen as destructive bonds and replace them with bonds to the "tribe." Likewise couple bonds were frequently broken up (usually by decree of Arol) when they seemed to threaten each individual's primary allegiance to the group. The only members immune to forced, frequent separation from their own children, and allowed to conduct intimate relationships not subject to denial or sabotage by the group's leaders, were those making and enforcing the rules: primarily Wulf, Arol, and eventually Fawn.

Wulf comes off in this film as emotionally abusive toward Arol; Arol as alternately kind and cruel towards others; and both of them as controlling "bullies" who present a black-and-white, Us vs. Them reality to their followers. At the same time, and just as emphatically, they are presented as charismatic, passionate, articulate, intuitive leaders, well-loved by many in the group, and insightful about much of what ails society and about ways of perhaps righting the ship. Wulf is the Beat-poet ideologue, a performance artist sometimes spouting extreme statements, while Arol (also skilled at rhetoric) was by all accounts the "implementer," steering daily life and relationships at Zendik in collaboration with a core group of favored members. Wulf and Arol cast Fawn, from her birth onwards, as the promised Savior of humanity—an unchosen path that led their daughter often to act callously herself until calling it quits and selling the Farm a year after

her mother's death. (In an astonishing fall from grace per Zendik standards, she pulled herself together financially, post-Zendik, by working in Walmart, the belly of the Deathculture beast.)

Prominent in this documentary are the skewed power relationships that shaped life at Zendik, and the damage to interpersonal, couple, and parent-child bonds they caused, in service to the philosophy that the Zendik Tribe should be preeminent in members' lives, protected from any competing individual connections. Less prominent here are all the factors that made this a compelling experiment for so many—and the agency that many members did experience, even amidst the restrictions imposed by the situation. Not everyone stayed simply because they'd been scared or brainwashed into thinking that Zendik was "the only thing going," in Wulf's words, and that the outside world was entirely hostile. *Surviving Zendik Farm* does describe some of the close ties that members developed, the levels of intimacy and actual honesty that kept the group so vital, but not to the extent that it might have if some others had been interviewed.

While "cult," a loaded term often applied to Zendik (sometimes even by these interviewees), is of debatable usefulness in describing it, there's no question that Zendik Farm was a "high-demand" group, expecting and requiring a lot of its members, and not tolerating those who didn't meet its expectations. Many came to it for that reason; they'd felt lost in their lives, whether as drug-addicted street kids, alienated Ivy League graduates, or anyone else who felt the conscious or unconscious ache of disconnection from the earth, from others, from themselves, from creative expression. In Zendik Farm Arts Cooperative they found a tribe to belong to and healthier ways of living and relating, albeit much of it created not by the wide-scale social pressure and limitations of the "Deathculture" but by very focused social pressure and restrictions coming from Zendik's founders and inner circle.

A sign at the gate reminded members, "All Ye Who Leave Here Abandon All Hope."

My impression has always been that Zendik was something of a "boot camp": a fitness boot camp (physical exercise and healthy living habits were high priorities), a "do-it-ourselves" and self-reliance boot camp (involving both back-to-the-land skills and creation of their own music, art, literature, cultural practices), a clean-living boot camp (no alcohol, drugs, even coffee), an intimacy boot camp (accommodating people at every level of previous relationship experience, and immersing members in practices designed to break down dishonesty and self-isolation), a personal resilience and self-assertion boot camp (not only in dealing with all the "feedback" coming one's way, but in learning how to become a successful recruiter and marketer of the group's publications, music, and other merchandise on frequent "selling trips"), and a personal growth boot camp (it was impossible to hide, and one either continued to participate in the dynamic weave, and learned how to navigate the complexities of relationships and daily life there, or one was shown the door, if not already bolting for it on one's own).

Individuals' relationships with Zendik Farm as a whole tended to be deeply involving and/or entangled. Casual, take-it-or-leave-it relationships to the group were not on the menu, and departure from the intensity of Zendik meant, in many cases, a complete cessation of contact as well; rejoining the "Deathculture" was the ultimate failure. To emphasize the point, a sign at the gate reminded members, "All Ye Who Leave Here Abandon All Hope."

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The greatest strength of *Surviving Zendik Farm* is its probing exploration of the personal experiences of those it interviews, combined with archival footage illustrating some of the past they are describing. It is worth watching simply for those elements.

The weaknesses are its omissions and, especially in relation to one event, its imbalanced perspective. Omitted is an examination of how Zendik changed over time. The first ex-Zendik I met had lived there during its earlier, more urban-adjacent West Coast phase; at that point, members supported themselves partly through shoplifting. According to past article author Lawrence, once they moved to more rural areas, they adopted the opposite approach, prioritizing good relations with their neighbors and trying to be of service to them rather than steal from them. Likewise, they also rapidly transformed from a group composed partly of "stoners" into a substance-free group of "health nuts." Power and influence shifted over the years from Wulf to Arol to Fawn, and every relocation brought changes as well. A much longer video series might have had time to deal with this broader picture; this single video does not.

I believe the greatest weakness, and the most unfortunate editing choice, is the amount of time spent on one individual with mental health issues who, more than 20 years after spending 11 months at Zendik, ended up shooting five people dead (and was killed himself) in Denver. Nearly seven minutes—more than one-twelfth of the video's runtime—is devoted to this person and to the reactions of interviewees who knew him. For context, somewhere between 1000 and 2000 person-years were spent in total by the many hundreds of people who called Zendik Farm home over the course of its four-plus decades. Yet one individual whose residency constituted well less than one-tenth of one percent of that time comes to cast a shadow over the entire film.

The filmmakers find one clip of Wulf saying that he would be willing to "kill" for the revolution, and he expects his followers would be willing to "kill" too; another clip shows a follower using similar language as part of a joke. These statements seem much more theatrical than real—simply a way of indicating intense

devotion to the "cause," an exercise in "more radical than thou" rhetoric that found no mirror in group members' actual actions. In practice, Zendik's form of revolution focused on creation, not destruction, at least in relation to the physical world; their motto, "Stop Bitching, Start a Revolution" was about finding peace by cultivating something new, not murdering those who were enmeshed in the old. They were too busy trying to convert others to their cause, on their seemingly nonstop selling trips, to turn around and kill these potential converts instead.

Zero examples are known of any active Zendiks engaging in acts of physical violence towards others, and among ex-Zendiks, just this one, greatly overplayed example. One reason this person is included is that one of the ex-Zendik interviewees became emotionally involved with him in the years since their respective stays there. The most dramatic interview clip reveals that he told her that he intended to "kill" just a few years before he did, and she stayed in touch with him nonetheless, hoping she could make a difference—and yet she couldn't prevent the eventual killing. The story struck me as extremely tangential, at best, to the larger Zendik story, and yet its gravity had a larger impact on the film than even its out-of-proportion seven-minute runtime would suggest.[2]

Lawrence and others I've spoken to have speculated that the underlying reason for its inclusion is the unfortunate current state of affairs in finding "eyeballs" to watch videos. No longer are traditional reviews or in-person recommendations the main ways that people discover media. Online algorithms, search terms, and viral posts direct far more people to what they watch than actual reviews or friends' recommendations do. Getting a video classified as (among other things) "True Crime," as this editing choice allows, will get it into significantly more video feeds than classifying it as merely an "Intentional Community" story.

Ironically, a likely much more telling act of (self-)violence from an ex-Zendik is absent from the film. As I learned in the course of my research, a leader



prominent in the community's history and also shown in the archival footage committed suicide two years ago. Yet the video does not mention this at all, despite its undoubtedly huge impact on many other ex-Zendiks and despite what it might reveal, if probed, about the heartbreak of leaving a collapsed utopian experiment after several decades of extremely close involvement.

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Given all its cautionary tales, I expect that many people watching this documentary (including me) will reach the conclusion, "I sure am glad I never joined that group." And yet, if something like this documentary had existed before their involvement, those who joined the group, and ended up becoming forever grateful for the experience and how it transformed their lives, might well have reached the same conclusion and avoided Zendik altogether. I myself am glad I entered with fresh eyes into the two "high-demand" groups I joined in my 20s, which also had what ultimately proved to be unhealthy power dynamics and "cultlike" behavior and/or demands.[3] I learned things through those experiences that I don't believe I could have learned any other way; and in fact, each person who joined also became part of significant evolutions and changes in each group. That was possible partly because I went in ready to have my own experience rather than already having been told what to expect, and so did others.

Reality and identity, whether of individuals or of groups, turn out not to be as fixed as some stories would have us believe. It's too easy to watch Wulf Zendik raving at the viewer in archival footage, or witness Arol wailing with less-than-Yoko-Onoesque skill in another improvised musical performance, or hear a tale of arbitrary cruelty, or watch footage of an ex-Zendik mass shooter, and be tempted to write off the whole enterprise. But as most of these interviewees also attest, it was a transformative experience that they (most of them, anyway) wouldn't have traded for anything.

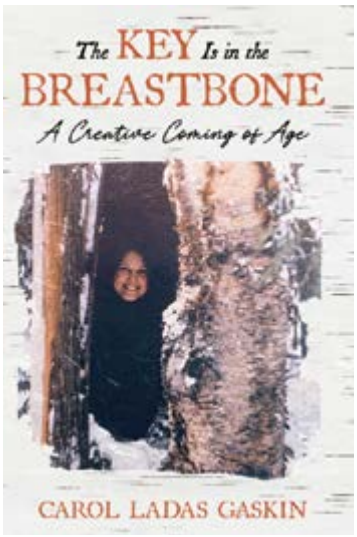
Surviving Zendik Farm, a film by Dan Greenstone and Travis Chandler, 82 minutes, 2026, is available for free viewing via youtube.com/@TheFringe-j9q.

Chris Roth edits Communities.

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1. See also gen-us.net/mating and gen-us.net/tangled.
2. For an alternative viewpoint, see helenzuman.substack.com/p/zendik-farm-the-movie.
3. See "Charismatic Leaders, Known and Outgrown," Communities #210, gen-us.net/charisma.

Review by Chris Roth



THE KEY IS IN THE BREASTBONE: A Creative Coming of Age

Carol Ladas Gaskin

Stone Lizard Press, Shoreline, WA, 2026, 411 pages, carolladasgaskin.com

This is one of the most beautifully written, evocative, engaging records I've ever encountered of a back-to-the-land communal group. It's also a work of art and psychological insight that will have appeal far beyond current or ex-communitarians, communal studies scholars, or those sharing its author's eventual vocation of working in clay. Anyone looking for a "good read" could enjoy it.

From the outset, it's grounded in a deep dive into intentional community living. The entirety of Part One,"The Experiment" (pages 7-171), traces the journey of Carol Ladas Gaskin, her daughter Dana, and a group of close friends who departed Northern California in 1968 to live communally, off-grid, in the forests of British Columbia. That story continues into the 1980s, interwoven in portions of Part Two, "My Family" (which uncovers Carol's backstory, pre-commune), and Part Three, "The Crucible" (which describes her further self-discovery through travel, and subsequent creative evolution). She lived on the communal homestead for 18 years until the group dispersed; surviving members still return to it in summer, though it's now stewarded year-round by others.

The author paints an intimate portrait of a group of close friends deciding to commit to one another and to the grand adventure of living self-reliantly in a remote setting without utilities or many other distractions/conveniences of modern life. "We bought two hundred acres of land, built A-frames just in time for winter, encountered bears in the woods, survived bitter cold, trudged up and down our snowbound road, struggled with frozen water lines, grew our own food, raised animals, and forged deep friendships...we were transformed as we discovered inner strengths we were unaware of" (p. 1).

Starting as "five friends wanting to live a simple life on the land and raise our children in a loving community" (p. 2), the group developed a shared vision and set of principles and, once arrived, discovered that "our lives without radio, television, or electricity slowed us down to the pace of the natural world. Nights were warmed by the wood stove and stories and music in the glow of kerosene lamps; we all sang or played guitar or banjo. Our days were filled with work we did in common…[and] the daily complexities and joys of preparing food and caring for the children" (p. 4).

Carol's prose, precise and poetic, evokes life lived not only in direct relationship with the natural world, the weather, the seasons, and all their demands and gifts, but also in intimate, interdependent relationship with others. In her memoir, those relationships evolve, deepen, become more complex, and present challenges nearly as pressing as facing a winter in uninsulated A-frames without enough firewood prepared (as happened their first year).

Living in a remote, off-grid community increases interdependence and intensifies experiences of closeness, estrangement, love, and loss. Especially in small, tight-knit

Despite having little past practical preparation for their back-to-the-land communal experiment, and despite some locals' predictions, they succeeded beyond all expectations.

groups, key members' departures often produce profound emotional as well as practical impacts. Here, in the course of less than a year, five out of nine adults, plus six children, leave for various reasons; the four remaining adults eventually become just three. Facing what resembles the dissolution of a close nuclear family, those who remain find succor not only in their continuing strong bonds with one another, but also in their intimate daily connection with the land.

Countless other issues confronted widely in community find their place in this story too: choices about how to bring in new members, set proper boundaries, become economically viable, and navigate disagreement, conflict, interpersonal tension. In nearly every case of the latter here, conversation works wonders. In fact, the interlocutors in this memoir tend to be so eloquent that I wondered at times whether the verbally gifted narrator herself may have been enhancing her characters' eloquence a bit in the retelling. Regardless, there's no doubt that Carol and her fellow pioneers were keenly sensitive, intelligent, outside-the-box participants in their organically evolving experiment, usually embracing it fearlessly.

Despite having little past practical preparation for that experiment, and despite some locals' predictions that they'd abandon it once snows became heavy their first winter, they succeeded beyond all expectations. On top of learning to live on the land and raise children together, Carol and others navigated shifting, often open romantic relationships and evolving understandings of their own and one another's callings and gifts. Like some other successful back-to-the-land communities, they benefited greatly through mentorship and mutual aid from a pacifist, religiously-based subculture equally out of step with mainstream consumer society.[1] In their case, the Doukhobors, members of a Russian sect that had fled religious and state persecution in their homeland, not only proved the best of neighbors but also "understood us far better than our friends had back home" (p. 47).

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A glance at the author's name hints at another reason those interested in contemporary communalism will find this memoir of keen interest: Carol was the second wife of Stephen Gaskin, teacher of Monday Night Class in late-'60s San Francisco and then founder of The Farm in Tennessee in 1970.

Carol and Stephen married in 1960, long before Stephen became the mythical figure who attracted 1500 class attendees at a time, then inspired followers to trek cross-country in a 60-vehicle caravan to establish a commune, serving as its spiritual leader. This earlier Stephen has charisma as well, enough to attract Carol into marriage, but also reveals many qualities likely to be glossed over in later mythologizing. The couple moved 12 times during their four years of marriage, with Stephen working at a pizza place off and on, trying to write the Great American Novel, studying at the local university, cultivating a serious addiction to cigarettes (while evicting a roommate for smoking marijuana, which he later championed), and, more concerning, proving to be a person who could not keep his word. Stephen was regularly dishonest and hypocritical, breaking commitments, hiding a long-term affair (revealed to Carol years later by the friend involved), and reinforcing the adage, "Never meet your generation's future heroes."

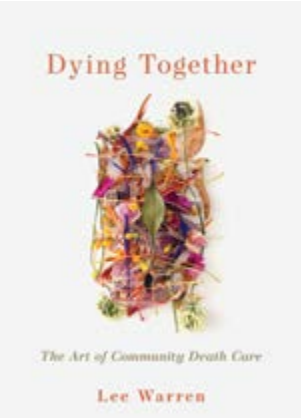
Out of all this, however, came a daughter, Dana, who proves central to the story and, from Carol's perspective, must have been the ultimate reason for the relationship. That's not to say that coparenting was easy; Stephen made agreements with Carol and then violated them, at one point virtually kidnapping Dana (taking her away from British Columbia back to The Farm well before the agreed-upon time), alternating between a laissez-faire attitude and severely-applied double-standards around her upbringing. Dana's childhood and teenagerhood ended up split between Carol's remote commune in BC and the bustle of The Farm in Tennessee, and she seemed to find strong belonging in both places, while also suffering the effects of this split life and its inconsistencies. As the years proceed, negotiations related to their child continue to reinforce the impression that Stephen was better appreciated at a distance than by having a marriage or child with him, but this should come as no surprise to those who've studied charismatic leaders. Ultimately the author comes to peace with the difficulties involved—again, on account of Dana, who today is her backyard-neighbor in Washington State.[2]

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Finally, one of the great pleasures of this book is how beautifully crafted it is. Each of its 67 chapters could stand on its own as a separate story, given adequate context (in fact, two appeared, prior to the book's publication, as articles in Communities[3]). Most are four to six pages long, making the 411 pages of this memoir seem much less imposing. Each also opens with a quoted piece of wisdom or poetry, bringing broader perspectives to this personal story. A helpful introduction traces the arc of the book and its most salient points, and an epilogue draws larger lessons from the spiritual journey the book has traced—through community, through family trauma, through discovering freedom, healing, and self-expression in the arts. Years as a pioneering communitarian helped Carol find her ultimate path as a clayworker, therapist, teacher—and, fortunately for readers, a writer.

Chris Roth edits Communities.

1. Among similar examples I've experienced personally, Sandhill Farm (1974) established itself amongst a high proportion of Mennonite neighbors in Rutledge, Missouri, and the Possibility Alliance (2007) deliberately located itself adjacent to the Amish in La Plata, Missouri.
2. See Dana Gaskin Wenig's own reflections on her communal childhood in "The Kids Are Talking: Pay Attention. Remembering a Communal Childhood," Communities #199, pages 42-46.
3. See Carol Ladas Gaskin's "Water: Life in the Wilderness," Communities #194, pages 8-9, and "A-Frames," Communities #198, pages 10-12.



DYING TOGETHER: The Art of Community Death Care

Lee Warren

New Society Publishers, 2026, 352 pages, queenofdeath.org/book and newsociety.com/book/dying-together/?aff=76

I read Lee Warren's *Dying Together: The Art of Community Death Care* in small bites, sandwiched between academic work and the rapid-fire, high-stress American news cycle of 2026. I noticed a consistent pattern: returning to Warren's words felt like easing into otherworldly meditation. My shoulders relaxed, my breathing got deeper, my reading slowed down, and my center of gravity seemed to drop. If my experience is any indication, *Dying Together* has the potential to root the reader in a slower, more meaning-infused life, regardless of how close to or far from our own deaths we are.

Warren sets out with two closely related goals. First, to introduce us to a world where "the group heart serves as a shock absorber, distributing the weight of loss across the many." And second, to share what she and others have learned that can support people without a ready-made community to re-imagine their own relationship with death in general, and the human relationships that will inevitably surround each of our deaths. She does both well.

The book moves between anecdotes, lessons learned, and invitations for personal contemplation and conversation. As Warren says, "the absence of these conversations doesn't protect us; it makes things worse," which is a good example of her ability to speak directly and summarize a complicated dynamic in an accessible way. One of her gifts is successfully inviting us into necessary conversations without dodging the awkward or hard parts.

Some of the chapters are more mythological (considering our relationship to "the underworld" or one she calls "a poetic love note to the primordial elements that are our forebearers and descendants" which starts with soil, for instance) and some are more practical (such as the paperwork and financial aspects of well-considered death preparation). Warren does a tricky tonal dance in this book: in an effort to give us a full picture of alternatives to dying-as-usual, she needs us to run the full gamut from mystical to legalistic with her within the same text. It's nearly impossible to have that feel smooth. She handles this by placing well-chosen stories as buffers between disparate moods. It mostly works, though readers should be prepared to walk into a differently decorated room each time you pick the book back up.

Some of those rooms are controversial and may feel like a shock to the system as folks enter them. This is not about Warren sensationalizing; it is about breaking through one of the core barriers she identifies in the book: our cultural illiteracy about death, and subsequent shut down of both creativity and choice in relation to death. One example is a story of a friend's parents who, well into their 90s, decided to die together, deliberately, surrounded by family. They stopped eating. For death-illiterate readers, that choice may seem monstrous. But as Warren points out, it is just a choice, one that was made thoughtfully and planned for with deep care for their family.

Warren is inviting us into her vision of "a death-literate culture" where "we would have access to tens of thousands of stories, films, books, and personal tales like this—accounts of intentional dying, preparation practices, and creative approaches to the end of life." Her work is grounded in her own very real experience within community, shifting the level of death-literacy together. Warren writes about death primarily within the relationship-rich context of Earthaven Ecovillage, a mid-sized intentional community that collectively held six members in two short years through their deaths.

This also poses a challenge for Warren, one that I'm very familiar with from my own writing, which often attempts to export valuable content from the social experiment bubbles of intentional community out to the wider world. The task is how to make something utterly soaked in cooperative culture accessible to mainstream American minds.

When I first received my book for review, I was surprised to see that it was 352 pages. Having worked my way through those pages, however, I think there is some real wisdom in this slow-paced deep-dive into each aspect of death and dying. In a time when "less is more" seems to be running a lot of publishing decisions, going long is a bold choice, but one that I think pays off here. Part of the wisdom of taking her time is being able to loop through that cultural translation from a lot of different angles. Culture shift is a big, complicated process, and one you can't do in tiktok nuggets.

Warren makes it worth the long read.

Yana Ludwig is a long-time communitarian and cooperative culture advocate. She is the author of multiple books and many articles, including The Cooperative Culture Handbook *(coauthored with Karen Gimnig) and* Building Belonging: Your Guide to Starting a Residential Intentional Community. *Yana currently writes from Wales, where she has been earning a Masters in Creative Writing at Swansea University, and is working, among other projects, on a memoir from her years in community.*

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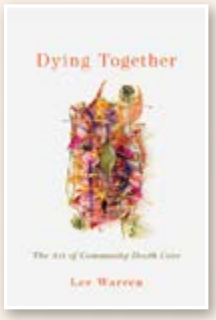
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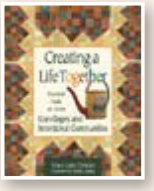
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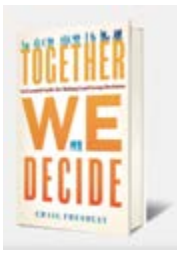
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BUILDING RESILIENCE FROM THE GROUND UP

What does it take for one community to strengthen everything around it? In nature, a keystone species holds an ecosystem together, and its presence lifts the whole web of life. **Narara Ecovillage**, on the Central Coast north of Sydney, Australia, is showing what that can look like for a community.

Narara is home to 250 people, including a "tribe" of 60 children, on 63 hectares of a former government horticultural research station. Founded by Lyndall Parris, it now includes three generations of her own family. Before starting, Lyndall and her husband Dave visited communities worldwide to learn how to weave together social, economic, ecological, and cultural life. They love welcoming visitors in return.

Now entering its 20th year, Narara has earned **Global Ecovillage Network's Hildur Jackson Award** as an exemplary ecovillage. Members are redefining their strategic plans for 2030, aiming to show "tangible regenerative progress" and offer hope to the world. They practice sociocracy, draw inspiration from member John Seed and Deep Ecology, and learn from local First Nations people.

Narara is also a lead voice in GEN's **Ecovillage Resilience Project** and our **Keystone Communities** work. The community has shared GEN's Resilience Tracker and Companion Cards, strengthened its disaster preparedness, and continues to grow its food and regional resilience initiatives.

Narara member and GEN Ambassador Tanya Mottl teamed up with permaculture elder Robina McCurdy to host a film screening, a workshop, and a regional day across Australia and New Zealand. These events brought together farmers, permaculture teachers, and food distributors. Tanya's community weaving continues as she invites people from GEN Australia, CoHousing, Transition Towns, and New Economy Network Australia to join GEN's online **Weaving Resilience** course and focus on community resilience.

Hear more in the Community Resilience podcast with Tanya Mottl at **ecovillage.org/podcasts**, and look for the Communities Toolkit at Permaculture Australia's 50th Anniversary **Return to the Village** in April 2027. The Keystone Communities toolkit and training launches in the next few months. See **ecovillage.org/resilience** for details.

FIC 40TH ANNIVERSARY COMMUNITIES TOUR

Hi everyone, this is Dave Booda, the new Executive Director for the Foundation for Intentional Community and this spring we will be turning 40[1]…we're officially over the hill! To celebrate, I'll be driving around the United States and Canada in my converted Sprinter van, visiting communities, hosting gatherings, and having conversations about the future of the intentional communities movement.

As many of you are seeing, there is a huge surge of people wanting to live in community. Whether it's the affordability of sharing resources, a desire to have a lighter impact on the ecosystem, or seeking belonging as a solution to the loneliness epidemic, intentional communities are on a lot of people's mind right now.

We want to celebrate our 40th with you, and we want to talk about what this movement could look like 10, 20, or another 40 years into the future. We want to hear your dreams and visions, and let's collaborate to make them happen.

I'm going to visit as many communities as I can, and I'll be in just about every part of the United States and southern Canada from February to May of 2027. I'll likely have some FIC staff with me as well. If you would like to work with us to host something at your community or in your region, I'd love to hear from you. Email me at **dave@ic.org**.

Thank you for 40 years of celebrating community, and here's to 40 more!.

1. While the original FIC–then named the Fellowship of Intentional Communities–started as an informal mutual support group in 1949, the new, more active national organization that we know today was incorporated in 1987 as the Fellowship *for* Intentional Community, and renamed the Foundation for Intentional Community in 2019. Watch for FIC historian Harvey Baker's reflections in the Spring 2027 issue

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The FEC at 50: Communal Economics, Childcare, Networking, and the IRS

By A. Allen Butcher

The Federation of Egalitarian Communities (FEC) celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2026. In the largest communities associated with the FEC—Twin Oaks Community in Virginia, East Wind Community in Missouri, and formerly Acorn Community in Virginia, all cofounded by Kathleen (Kat) Kinkade[1]—and in its smaller groups, thousands of people have experienced a full immersion in a non-patriarchal, gender-equal, partnership culture. Many have testified upon leaving egalitarian communalism about how profoundly the experience transformed their view of the world, and about how living in the non-possessive, sharing, cooperative culture of communal society influenced how they have chosen to live upon rejoining the Outside World.

People in each new generation always question the dominant culture's value structure of property, patriarchy, greed, and exploitation of people and planet, leading many to focus upon building alternatives to the monetary system, by living the opposite values of gifting, sharing, personal responsibility, and respect for all of life. For many, experiencing egalitarian communalism is the realization of the ideal expressed by Martin Luther King Jr. of the "beloved community." For others, communalism was just one stop in their search for what B. F. Skinner called "the good life."

Communalism offers a way back to our prehistory of clan and tribal culture, before the advent of money. People growing up in capitalist culture often think of money as being the problem, echoing the thought in Paul's first letter to Timothy (1 Timothy 6:10 in the New Testament) that "the love of money is the root of evil." Egalitarian communal culture's restriction of the use of money only for exchange with the Outside World, utilizing forms of direct democracy internally for organizing production and consumption of goods and services, results in the realization that the love of gifting and sharing is the root of happiness!

In every age, people have turned away from the competition of monetary economics to live the values of cooperation. As the monetary system has evolved and grown, so have the methods and processes of the communal traditions. Today, the cultural innovations that have been developed within the FEC, such as its development of time-based economics and of what Riane Eisler calls "partnerism," have enabled its survival for a half-century. The FEC will likely survive through the future as long as the member communities continue to effectively respond to the changing cultural, economic, natural, technological, and political/regulatory environments.

Women and Children in Communal Society

Through the processes of labor-sharing, Federation communities value domestic labor or reproduction equally with industrial and other forms of production. This is an economic innovation unique to time-based economies valuing all labor equally that benefits the community. Or to put it succinctly: LIVE • FREE! (Labor Is Valued Equally • For Realizing Economic Equality!)

In their first decades, Twin Oaks, founded in 1967, and East Wind, landing in the Ozark Mountains in 1974, both assumed that a communal society must have a communal childcare program to take the place of nuclear families, as it was known that nuclear families tend to destroy communalism. The suggestion of centralized, large-group communal childcare was presented by the Harvard psychologist B. F. Skinner in the utopian fiction *Walden Two*, which was the main inspiration for our communal societies.

But how much, I sometimes wondered, did we really know about what we are doing? Kat had lived about 10 years at Walden House, Twin Oaks, and now East Wind. One member had lived a year in kibbutz, and several of us had lived a year or two in collective houses in college. Clearly, Kat was our most experienced communitarian, and most of us regarded her in high esteem for her clarity of thinking, eloquence, and writing ability; moreover, most of us were in our 20s while Kat was twice our age. The problem was that at least with regard to children in community, Kat was struggling just like the rest of us to figure out how to manage the fragmentation and dissolution of secular communal society caused by the influence of children and families.

Federation of Egalitarian Communities



The best actual model of communalism we had was Israeli kibbutzim, most of which had communal children's houses where the children lived, including sleeping at night away from their parents. Yet many of those who grew up in the kibbutz children's houses did not want their children to grow up in them. Then, as the kibbutzim devolved into family units with separate apartments, that transition became a slippery-slope of privatization and the gradual loss of communalism, to where now most of the rural Israeli kibbutzim are essentially cohousing communities on government-owned land trusts. However, there is now a movement of former kibbutz youth creating urban communities having various levels of communal economies.

The Federation communities did not want to go the way of the kibbutzim, yet we had the problem of parents not keeping the child program agreements that the community felt were necessary to maintain our communalism. Although we thought that a communal society had to have a communal childcare program, we could not come up with any design for it other than what we knew about Israeli kibbutzim. After decades of saying one thing and doing another—that is, talking about communal childcare while some parents refused to follow all the Child Program agreements—Twin Oaks and East Wind both finally gave up their communal children's houses in the mid-1990s.

The communities did not collectively decide on what to do instead of children's houses with regard to children, they simply ended their community-sponsored daycare programs with their requirement that children sleep together separate from their parents, and left the parents to arrange their own childcare solutions. What resulted is what I call "nested cofamilies." The communities continue to give money and some labor to parents for the support of their children, while the parents look for other members who will volunteer to have long-term relationships with their children, similar to what is called "godparents." The change was essentially from large-group communal childcare to small-group communal childcare arranged around each child. The small childcare groups involve mostly unrelated people, which I call a "co-family," nested within the larger community.

Federation Exclusivity and Fellowship Inclusivity

Kat Kinkade wrote a book about the first five years of Twin Oaks titled A *Walden Two Experiment*, published in 1972. The magazine *Psychology Today* serialized parts of the book in two 1973 issues, and a copy made its way to Mordecai Bentov (1900-1985), an Israeli journalist and politician who was a member of Kibbutz Mishmar HaEmek. Mordecai was a signatory on the Israeli declaration of independence, and founder in 1927 and long-time leader of the kibbutz federation, Kibbutz Artzi. Learning of a kibbutz-like communal society in the US, Mordecai contacted Kat at East Wind and invited her to a six-week, all-expenses-paid kibbutz visit in the late autumn and early winter of 1975.

Upon her return to East Wind, Kat discussed with Malon Wilkus and others how the networking of kibbutzim in Israel via their various movement organizations aided individual kibbutzim. They also discussed the possibility that a similar movement organization of communal societies in North America may be able to attract significant financial aid from the comparatively rich kibbutzim, for our severely under-capitalized communities. That intention was never talked about much. Instead, the selling points for attracting communities to join a North American communal movement became the services that a movement organization could provide to its member groups and to small, new, forming communal groups. Kat left East Wind in 1978, returning to Twin Oaks in 1982.

I had already proposed and created for myself at East Wind a Networking Manager position for connections with other area communities and cooperatives. I thought, along with others I talked and corresponded with, that what was most needed was a cross-movement networking organization engaging all sorts of intentional community movements, not just communal. That was not what Kat and Malon wanted, so I was sidelined.

Autumn of 1976 delegates from Twin Oaks and North Mountain, Virginia; Dandelion, Ontario; and Aloe, North Carolina joined the East Wind delegates Kat and Malon at East Wind Community to found the Federation of Egalitarian Communities, representing about 150 adults in our five communities. Malon explained to me that he and Kat could not come up with a better term to use in the name other than "egalitarian." Today I think that the term "partnership" has advantages, as it has half as many syllables and is more easily understood.

Alpha Farm in Oregon expressed interest in joining the Federation, and sent two





Images courtesy of Allen Butcher





observers, Glen and Muffy, to the FEC Assembly IV in January 1978. At that time Alpha had 15 members, with a gender ratio similar to East Wind's of twice as many men as women. Twin Oaks usually had an even gender ratio. Soon after, Malon wrote a letter to Glen inviting Alpha to join the FEC, explaining that the "core of our ideology" was non-exploitation, requiring participatory governance. Malon also explained the need for a homogeneous Federation of similar communities, citing the experience of the Fellowship of Intentional Communities (FIC) founded in 1949, and the Inter-Communities of Virginia (ICV) network which had only lasted a few years around 1970. Because both of these groups welcomed the whole diversity of types of communities, neither the FIC nor ICV, Malon stated, were able to create a "sound and prosperous Community Movement. … They just could not agree on doing anything substantially beneficial for anyone." So Malon and others insisted that the FEC was to be a selective, exclusive network of communities.

Malon is a very capable organizer, explaining that "The earliest thing I can remember is feeling confident." Malon conceived the idea for East Wind to start a nutbutter manufacturing business, beginning production in 1980. This huge project involved every member of the community, requiring financing from a couple different cooperative loan organizations, which in turn required that East Wind change its *Walden Two*-inspired Planner-Manager form of government to the democratic management of worker cooperatives. Malon left EW at the end of 1982, and founded in 1986 a private equity, business investment firm later renamed American Capital, Ltd. Malon is quoted in a *Forbes* magazine article dated April 23, 2007 explaining: "I thought I could create a better society, but common ownership didn't work, so I became a capitalist." My view is that common ownership works when people want it to work, and fails when people think and act only about themselves and not the group.

Ten years after the FEC formed, Charles Betterton of Stelle Community in Illinois started an initiative to rejuvenate the Fellowship of Intentional Communities (FIC) begun in 1949 by Arthur Morgan and his family and friends involved in Community Service, Inc. at The Vale community near Yellow Springs, Ohio. In the mid-1980s Charles was looking for an organization to network the whole intentional communities movement and thought the FIC could be expanded to a much more active and influential community networking organization. I soon joined with Charles, and encouraged Laird Sandhill (Schaub) of Sandhill Farm, who was then the most active person in the Federation, to help the Fellowship's all-inclusive continental-community-networking organization to grow and succeed. Charles, Laird, Dan Questenberry of Shannon Farm, Don Pitzer of CSA/ICSA, and I were the five founders of the revitalized and soon renamed and incorporated Fellowship for Intentional Community.

I was quite amazed how it turned out that the Federation (FEC)—resulting from Kat's and Malon's insistence upon a selective community networking organization—became the strongest support for the inclusive community network of the Fellowship (FIC). The November 1991 issue of the FEC newsletter *Soundings* states, "Our organizational skills have been relied on heavily by the Fellowship...for carrying out the FIC's nascent, yet ambitious program. … It is felt by the [Federation] Delegates that the concentration of resources in the Federation makes it possible for us to take advantage of the important new opportunities for outreach exposure that the FIC is creating." The Spring 1995 issue of *Soundings* states, "The FEC has been heavily involved in the FIC since the latter's 1986 revitalization, paying for people to attend FIC meetings and using labor credits to support FIC work when it aligns with FEC goals. The FEC is also the biggest dues-payer in the FIC, supporting the organization with $500 per year."

Federation Membership and the IRS

While the Federation has never had more than a few member communities, over 60 communal groups have expressed interest in FEC membership over the decades, by attending at least one FEC Delegate Assembly. There are probably many reasons why the groups never became full members, yet the most likely problem was that most of those interested groups were small communities that did not want to spend the time and money to travel to the regular Assemblies, or pay the annual Federation dues.

Acorn Community, the third largest of the FEC full-member groups, dropped

out of the FEC around the year 2020 due to an internal conflict becoming a conflict between Twin Oaks and Acorn, when people on one side of the conflict left Acorn to join Twin Oaks. Alpha Farm did not become a Federation full-member group until 2026 because for many years it had a policy of profit-sharing as a leaving fund for departing members, which was contrary to the Federation requirement of total-income-sharing. Most Federation groups offer only a small leaving consolation when people drop their membership.

The largest and oldest Federation member communities are incorporated via a very advantageous IRS tax-exempt status called 501(d) Religious and Apostolic Association, created in 1936 by an act of the US Congress for communal groups. For many years Twin Oaks filed its taxes as a 501(d) organization without formally obtaining that IRS designation, until in 1977 the community received a letter from the IRS stating that they were not exempt from taxes and that they owed $250,000 in back taxes plus interest.

The problem that the IRS identified was our lack of a "vow of poverty." Catholic monasteries and similar religious societies incorporate under the 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status, which requires a vow of poverty, meaning that when people join, they must donate all of their assets to the monastery and not get any of it back, nor have any claim to the communal assets when they leave. Although Twin Oaks, East Wind, and similar communities do share their income, they do not require that members donate all of their assets upon joining. They may keep pre-owned assets out of the community, or loan them to the community and receive them back when they leave if they are not used up or destroyed in the meantime. However, any income those assets may generate while the owner is a member is agreed to be donated to the community.

The IRS argued that when the 501(d) tax status was created in 1936 the US Congress meant to include a "vow of poverty" clause in that status as well. Not agreeing with this argument, Twin Oaks appealed the problematic IRS ruling to the Tax Court, and four years later won the case, receiving its 501(d) tax-exempt determination in 1981. As Twin Oaks had been saving money from its businesses in case it lost the IRS case, it now had a large amount of money to invest in a new central kitchen-dining-complex (KDC) named Zhankoye, after an historical Jewish communal community in Ukraine, completing construction in 1985.

Recently, while doing research for this and other writings about the FEC's 50th anniversary, I looked on the IRS website and found that the Service has removed its earlier document about 501(d) incorporation and replaced it with a revised document dated 2024 which says that it is not yet official. The proposed revisions state that 501(d) organizations must evidence religious activities or lose their tax-exempt status (see: www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p5627.pdf). Upon alerting FEC groups about this the responses I have received so far are that people are concerned yet do not think there is an immediate danger. As a former member, I would think that even a long-term danger ought to be addressed, yet so far I have heard of no such efforts. That work would need to be done by current members, yet to paraphrase Florence Welch, we ex-members did not build this ship to wreck.

My suggestion to the Federation communities is to take advantage of the IRS threat and begin to use religion as another means for building partnership culture, similar to how the communities use governance and economics as tools for co-creating gender-partnership and human-and-nature partnership. Gender-equal religions exist in the forms of neo-paganism and of Native American spirituality.

Members of Federation communities may have taken pride in their example of successful secular communal societies, yet it is worth considering that if gender-partnership and human-and-nature partnership are primary social change goals, then religion and spirituality may be effective tools for social change. I think that Federation communities adopting Partnership Spirituality might actually be the missing element needed for the future growth of partnership culture.

A. Allen Butcher is founder of Dry Gulch Ecovillage in Denver, Colorado, and of the School of Intentioneering. See intentioneers.net.

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1. On page 84 of Kat's 1994 book, *Is it Utopia Yet?*, she writes, "People used to ask me to list the requirements for community success, and I would answer, 'One fanatic.' I would say, 'You have to want to do community more than anything else in the world.'" She also once told us in Community Meeting, "If you think I'm hard to live with now, just wait until I'm senile." Seriously, I do not think Kat was ever senile. It was good to see that she was well taken care of at the end, at Twin Oaks. See "In Memoriam: Kat Kinkade 1930-2008," COMMUNITIES #140, pages 80, 78-79, 77.



The Beauty of Disorder: From Waste to ReGeneration

By Cara Judea Alhadeff, PhD

The following includes excerpts from my forthcoming two-volume Radical Eco-Art in Action: Unlearning What We Think We Know.

Look closely at the present you are constructing, it should look like the future you are dreaming.
—Alice Walker

The system reproduces its existence because it goes unrecognized.
—Pierre Bourdieu

I once walked into a store and bought something. I purchased a product. Just like that. So easy.

To give you a bit of context: for over 30 years, I have lived in a primarily barter-economy. I have never owned a credit card, smartphone, or car (I bike and walk and catch rides). I am committed to minimal (almost zero) consumption and zero-waste (we reuse all by-products). For material "necessities"/"luxuries" such as clothes, shoes, toiletries, tools, appliances, toys, books, office supplies, etc., I organize and host community swaps and gift economy opportunities such as our mutual-aid economy free store. My family and I have lived in our eco-art converted school bus for eight years. Within the convenience-waste status quo, these ways of living have been both joyful and agonizing.

To confess (and to be specific) the store was a Best Buy. I purchased an external drive for my refurbished laptop. The quality of shock that ran through my nervous system felt eerily calm. I remember thinking, *this is what it feels like to be a consumer, a real American, a normal citizen of the Land of Abundance and Access…a normal person.* Order incarnate. For years in my storytelling mind, I have replayed that scene—crossing the threshold into bigboxtopia, finding the aisle, the product I had been advised to buy new ("Just Do It!"), the cashier ringing it up triggering the supply-chain hegemony, handing it back to me (unbagged, at least), walking out the front doors back to wherever I was going. Somehow, I exited the air-conditioned vacuum-of-awareness unscathed.

Well, not really. Decades later, alarms continue to sound. *THERE ARE NO EXTERNALITIES!* I wittingly contributed to the "disparate impact" of positioning others as collateral damage: "sacrifice zones," "road-effect zones," "distributional consequences," "transition costs," "adjustment costs." These aren't unanticipated consequences; we *know* what happens when we buy most products in this country. In their *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity,* David Graeber and David Wengrow write: "Power over possessions [is] directly translated into power over other human beings." The hollow burden of knowledge of our infrastructural addictions maintained at the expense of harming other people and non-human ecosystems continues to cry out—our common pain. Perhaps Chaos incarnate. As a response to systemic oppressions inherent throughout our current reality of ethnic cleansing, institutionalized misogyny, and climate crisis, I have chosen to raise my child and write *Radical Eco-Art in Action: Unlearning What We Think We Know*—a cross-cultural, cross-temporal, cross-spatial, interspecies tapestry of possibilities. This is my attempt to offer personal-political strategies-as-seeds to cultivate social justice dialog, ecological consciousness, and collective action. An attempt to weave coherent order with delicious chaos.

• • •

How is it possible that I ever get on a flight? For over a decade, I refused to take an airplane for ecological reasons—embodied ethics that shape my every decision. Regardless of my refusal, each night my subconscious leads me into the great inferno of the airport realm—essentially lost in an unknowable city. My barrage of anxiety nightmares always includes an airport scene—desperately yelling, trying to prove to those indifferent to me that someone needed to be somewhere but couldn't get there for too many inexplicable techno-bureaucratic reasons. In these dreams we have lost something terribly precious but can't access connection/communication because there are too many irrational obstacles. I wake up tormented, exhausted, desperately depleted. This is not the kind of disorder I hope to embody…

Now, it is the tail end of my three-month climate justice performance tour in 2025, during which I traveled back and forth between Boston and Miami on Amtrak (maddening tales) and Greyhound (harrowing mishaps) and hitched

many car rides with solo drivers (enchanting episodes of human connection) (so much for public transportation!). I presented subjects ranging from social permaculture as an antidote to Big Ag and Big Pharma, fibershed as an antidote to fast fashion, creative-regenerative affordable housing as antidote to our epidemic of individualism, ancient wisdoms and cross-cultural models of radical symbiosis as antidotes to petroleum parenting and digital technologies, and so many more exquisite entanglements.

Despite meticulous planning, heart-wrenching circumstances forced me to take flight. Immediate maternal duty takes precedence over all else.

I have arrived at the airport. When I get to my gate, I encounter the "border patrol"—those airline agents who scowl as they contemptuously push and shove your overstuffed personal item into that hideously ever-shrinking measuring contraption, smirking as they prove your bag has exceeded the airline size limitations. Lines of other exhausted, irritated Zone 2-6 travelers (maybe some sympathetic) hover behind the perpetrating victim. It's a $75.00 penalty fee if I bring the bag through—half of my month's rent for the land on which our converted school bus tiny home lives.

So I begin the layering process—resembling a humanoid entering the chrysalis phase. Integral to my "economic alternatives" performance is how I hyper-clothe myself in the presence of other travelers waiting at the gate. No one seems to notice my overlay undertaking; almost everyone is transfixed by their smartphone. I am invisible as I dance with Trickster. I stack it on—three seasonal changes of clothing for my tour. Why not literally embody permaculture's stacking function? Especially as we learn from migrant refugees about how to survive fleeing across borders.

I am indisputably wearing globalization—sweat-factory labor spanning Asia to Latin America from head to toe. Saturday Night Live's version of Temu/Xiemu, eat your heart out: three pairs of socks and three pairs of underwear. Four more pairs of each (along with my stretched-out teeny-weeny bikini) are stuffed in my purple corduroy pants that are held up by my childhood belt with rainbow-stretch strap and Snoopy-jogging-with-Woodstock magnet belt buckle—I have worn this treasure for 48 years.

Over 15 or so minutes, my 100-pound body, 5'4", triples in girth. Around my neck: six dresses, 13 shirts, three skirts. Around my waist: three scarves and two pairs of pants. Atop this ensemble, a foam-green so-soft leather dress coat, an orange raincoat with peach-colored stars and two ponchos—one bright pink with striped hoodie and one turquoise hue—although factory-made, both deliciously soothing. They also conceal my four over-the-shoulder bags, wrist warmers, tie-dye pjs, 1970s jungle-print pillowcase and deep turquoise fairtrade *ahimsa* silk sleep sack handmade by Tan Minh Single Mothers' Cooperative in Vietnam.

I keep promising myself that I will do things differently—that I will not always put my body and psyche on the line as I attempt to spotlight status quo senselessness. Yet once again I am straining under straps that cut, burdens that protrude. I hide layers under layers while constantly readjusting the layers. There is no gliding through society's cracks. They snag and too often tear—and inevitably deform. The more I try to wedge myself through those thresholds of impossibility, the tighter they squeeze around me, and the more claustrophobia I experience. Attempting to slip through conformity's narrow passage exacts costs.

Except for the handknit and crocheted clothes and a few fluffy gifts from my mother, not one of these 39 wrapped, draped, stuffed items was purchased—new, or for that matter, used. I acquired them all from community swaps, Naked Lady Parties, and free stores like S.O.U.L. Commons: Shared Opportunity Used Local, the free store my partner and I started in Paonia, Colorado nearly three years ago.

• • •

S.O.U.L. Commons provides economic equity for community members suffering from the classist impacts of industrial and "service" capitalism. The concepts of gift economy and infrastructurally-rooted barter economy are profoundly foreign to most people in this country. Even committed "thrifters" (those who regularly buy from



***Body Composting/ Mycelial Paradise, Micaela Amateau Amato, gouache painting for* Zazu Dreams: Between the Scarab and the Dung Beetle, A Cautionary Fable for the Anthropocene Era.**



Photosynthetics, Self-Portraits in the Anthropocene, Hambidge Residency, Georgia #33.



***Waste-Consuming Creatures (nudibranch, dung beetles, brine shrimp), Micaela Amateau Amato, gouache painting for* Zazu Dreams.**



Theater of Space, masked tree.







Wild, Zazu, Cara building S.O.U.L. (Shared Opportunity Used Local), Franco and Cara gifting from S.O.U.L.

and donate to thrift stores), consistently have a hard time grasping the inner workings of a free store. I am in the process of co-developing an international network of free stores, repair cafés, and upcycling centers to share ideas/actions about practical, beautiful, everyday "trash"-reuse. Throughout the US, in rural communities (ecovillages and small towns) and urban centers (San Francisco and the East Bay as well as all the boroughs of NYC—I lived in all five, except for Staten Island), I have implemented infrastructures to support gift economies for 35 years. Although I still clearly participate in our consumer-convenience transactional world, I feel I can take one step closer to living with integrity while attempting to co-instigate radical (root-based) systemic change.

I am part of a collective: decentralized, horizontal coalitions-of-difference that I am attempting to fortify through *affirmative queer anarchy,* the term I use to describe a practice in which we as individuals and collectives refuse to participate in corporate-sustained "realities"/"inevitabilities." However, neuronormativity ensues when my counter-institutional behavior is pathologized, straitjacketed as "extreme"; direct action is relegated to chaos that must be hypermanaged. We continue to normalize the myopic lens of institutionalized individuality, the pernicious deregulation and market fundamentalism of Margaret Thatcher's TINA (There Is No Alternative)-mentality that currently sustains the core of collective impotency and social inertia.

"There is no alternative" originated with 19th-century liberal political theorist Herbert Spencer. Such neurotypicality dominates our cultural intercourse. As an antidote to TINA, *affirmative queer anarchy* explores how to visually, somatically/kinetically represent the eco-aesthetic, eco-social imperative of nonlinear, relational time/quantum entanglements. "Spooky action at a distance," Einstein's reference to quantum entanglement—how all living things from our microbiome to the macro-cosmos are interwoven—invokes an eco-ethical politics of spiritual intelligence.

Collectively we can move beyond what we think we know. We plant realistic seeds of change (the permaculture chaos of natural order), not fabricate fixed solutions (modernity's order). As citizen-activists we explore cartographies not as a catalog of answers, but as opportunities to recognize the value of rediscovering our innate capacities to think and act beyond the habitual, to blast the lull of cultural somnambulism—to inhabit the fertility of disorder.

• • •

S.O.U.L. Commons is not just a free store but also a social-welfare venture, a hands-on, social-justice educational experiment that expands our capacity to cul-

tivate relevancy through symbiotic direct relationships. These grassroots mutual-aid, collaborative consumption practices give face to both institutionalized poverty and institutionalized racism that too often converge in an indifferent abstract abyss. A practice of environmental justice and community action focusing on Shared, Opportunity, Used, Local develops resilient communities through local infrastructures that support equity, promote ecological and human health, enact reparative justice, and support local food and farming, arts, and resource use.

Through an urgent commitment to these creative collaborations, we can transform industrial-capitalism's everyday tyranny, violence, and entitlement. S.O.U.L. engages five place-specific strategies that create a bridge linking:

1) individual *response-ability*— through behavioral changes;

2) community action-based creative collaboration—for example, through Resource Tree, which catalogs the skills and creative possibilities among members of our community so that when an individual or an institution (such as a school or library) needs something, rather than purchasing it online or at a big box store, they will have abundant access to a series of local resources and go-to advisors;

3) infrastructural re-design—in the form of both personal support (parenting-accountability forums, deprivatized-shared transportation) and structural systems (building energy audits, landfill regulations, waste management), with QR codes *not* required, so no smartphone ownership required;

4) corporate accountability—for example, establishing a safe-drinking-water hotline, local grocery stores banning single-use plastic bags, restaurants banning Styrofoam take-out-containers or any kind of straws (neither plastic nor PFAS-laden paper, except for people who *need* them—I have written extensively about this non-binary consumer-corporate shift in "Greenwashing: The Lure of Capitalism"); and

5) policy transformation—for example, a Town Public Works maintaining its water pipe system to avoid lead poisoning in water and general contamination.

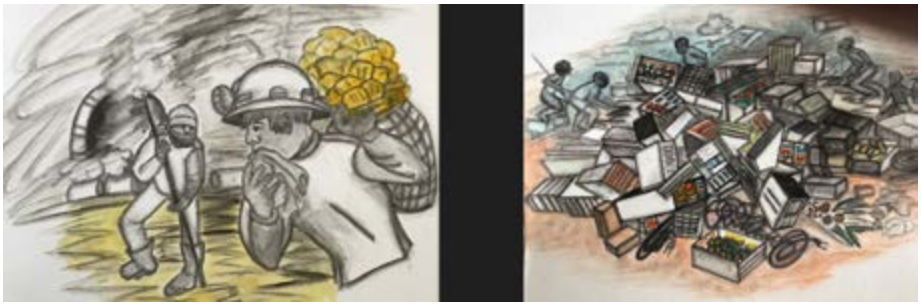
These five interlocking spheres connect the private with the public, the personal with the political. Many people feel their actions honestly don't count, but when we approach our individual actions within the context of collective behavioral change, we can impact our entire society—our entire planet. Just as all toxins accumulate, all positive actions accumulate. As all forms of oppression are interconnected, all forms of emancipation are equally interconnected.

This embodied economy is not about degrowth. It is about growing differently: mutually beneficial co-evolution as a collective act of remembering—remembering how to co-exist, how to live/learn/be curious in relation to one another. S.O.U.L. invites acquisition through magical accidents—and often through deep attunement. One root of *to acquire* is *to inquire*. How can we shift the ideology of infrastructure (centralized, mechanized, inevitabilities rooted in conquest, colonialism, and capitalism) to lived-shared idea-action infrastructure rooted in inquiry and inviting the unexpected?

With its fibershed-based natural-dye garden and a tiny-home building facility, our cooperative, public, S.O.U.L. Commons/Radical Art, Body, and Politics Intersectional Maker Space is a fertile example of embodied economics. It serves an average of 700-1000 people a week (more during the holidays)—local residents and visiting tourists of all economic backgrounds. Within the first few weeks of our makeshift, slightly awkward, always evolving structure, over $10,000 of material goods were exchanged, taken out of the waste stream, "saved" from landfill.

Both S.O.U.L. and bioregional food production generate *contact zones.* Contact zones, infrastructures of storytelling, cultivate webs of sense-making. Yet none of our attempts to establish contact zones will take root unless we raise our children differently and choose to model different behavior through ecological, ethical parenting.

What if we modeled how private enterprise no longer implies technocratic domi-



***Miners / E-Waste, Micaela Amateau Amato, gouache painting for* Zazu Dreams.**



Cryptobiotic Immunities, Self-Portraits in the Anthropocene, Triangle Lake, Oregon #4.

nance (resulting in climate chaos), but instead implies public debate and collective, creative risk-taking as the foundation for interwoven contact zones? Instead of buying new and perpetuating sacrifice zones, citizen activists can establish contact-zone infrastructures for reused everything, repair cafés, mutual aid economies, soil-to-soil, soil-to-skin fibershed pathways, open-source technologies, accessible Transfer Stations, and community seed banks. These *Reclamation Infrastructures* enable people to create less waste—to buy less and use more of what we already have. In fact, they enable us to actively *consume* waste, following in the tracks and sinuous trails of waste-consuming creatures such as dung beetles, mycelium, and sea slugs.[1]

While living at Ecovillage Ithaca, I worked with my neighbor Frederic Laloux (author of *Reinventing Organizations*), who studies companies that incorporate the needs of employees, local communities, and environmental ethics into their ownership and decision-making models. This version of Shared, Opportunity, Used, Local helps create resilient local economies, ecologies, and communities. It demonstrates group empowerment as we reduce our reliance on global supply chains. S.O.U.L. offers cross-cultural examples and biomimicry models (innovation inspired by nature) that can galvanize people of diverse backgrounds to find allies in unexpected places and actualize urgently needed deindustrialized, decentralized, and bioregional paradigm shifts.

Our S.O.U.L. Commons is a forum not only for economic emancipation, but also for artistic expression and vulnerability empowerment. This public-private space enables people of all ages, all genders, all racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds to experiment with literally trying on multiple personas. Julie, a regular S.O.U.L. community member, writes: "The Free Store allowed my inner self to come alive through dress and play without stress of money. I am able to express and explore all my multiple selves inside this wonderful, beautiful body. I allowed my ego to look away with joy and continuous freedom to be me!"

Dr. Cara Judea Alhadeff, Sephardic anarchist mother, performance artist, photographer, writer, climate-justice organizer, and educator, has published dozens of critically-acclaimed books and essays on eco-spirituality, climate justice, critical philosophy, sexuality, art, petroleum parenting, and living our ecological ethics including Zazu Dreams: Between the Scarab and the Dung Beetle, A Cautionary Fable for the Anthropocene Era *and* Viscous Expectations: Justice, Vulnerability, The Ob-scene. *Alhadeff's forthcoming book,* Radical Eco-Art in Action: Unlearning What We Think We Know *(Vernon Press), will be performed during the World Affairs Conference. She and her family live and perform in their eco-art installation repurposed school bus. Visit www.carajudeaalhadeff.com.*

See also this survey: docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSenLPO9Qf6MnhwPWM7K3BpDhuO0H-GwK4Kk-H8jsHlQ-H9kkg/viewform and this interview: www.kvnf.org/kvnf-stories/2024-11-15/s-o-u-l-store-celebrates-1-year-anniversary-and-the-grand-opening-of-paonia-makers.

1. Find more examples in the author's *Zazu Dreams: Between the Scarab and the Dung Beetle, A Cautionary Fable for the Anthropocene Era*.



Photosynthetics, Self-Portraits in the Anthropocene, Hambidge Residency, Georgia #39.



Repurposing mattress from S.O.U.L.

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

—**Chuck Durrett**, The Cohousing Company

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—**Shen Pauley**, reader and author, Barre, Massachusetts

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We welcome stories and connections from throughout these and related networks, and hope to hear from you!

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