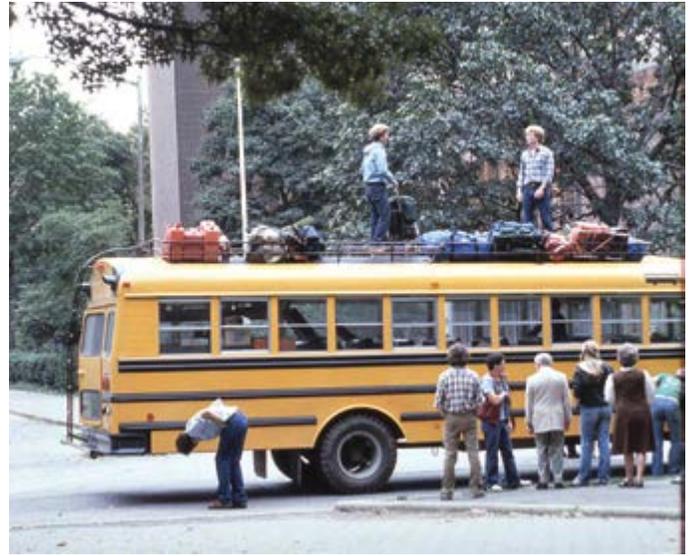# Charismatic Leaders, Known and Outgrown

By Chris Roth

For anyone whose head remained out of the sand, the decade starting in 1980 was a difficult one to become an adult. The accident at Three Mile Island in 1979 had made the dangers of nuclear power clear—only reinforced by the meltdown at Chernobyl seven years later. Dr. Helen Caldicott regularly warned of a short life-expectancy for our species if we couldn't rein in nuclear weapons too. Meanwhile, among their other activities, the Ronald Reagan and George Bush Sr. administrations seemed to be waging active war on the natural world, facilitated by the apocalyptic ideology of Reagan's Interior Secretary, James Watt, who believed it our sacred duty to use up all of our God-given natural resources before an imminent Judgment Day. The Reagan administration also opposed even modest measures to move our society in a more ecological direction, famously removing the White House solar panels installed by Jimmy Carter. The earth warmed precipitously throughout the decade, bringing climate change to public consciousness, while our civilization seemed simultaneously to be built on (and utterly dependent on) fossil fuels, methane-emitting animal agriculture, and ever-increasing consumption, all of which promised to spell further doom for the climate.

Role models of people making effective change and dedicated to non-hypocritical truth-speaking in response to all this seemed in short supply in the wider public sphere. In fact, a disempowering, homogenizing mass culture, propagated at that time by television more than anything else, appeared to be a large part of the problem.

I was 18 at the start of those discouraging Reagan/Bush Sr. years, and 30 when they finally ended. By 18 I had already divorced myself from television, and within a couple years I found myself divorced from a conventional educational path as well. I could not feel excited by a future in either academia or society-as-it-existed when both my personal world (especially once I left home for college) and the world at large felt as if they were falling apart around me.

I needed to find something that made sense, that offered some hope of redemption and change from what I was experiencing and seeing. I wanted to find a way of being that was coherent and aligned with my awareness of the state of the world and with efforts to heal rather than destroy it. I wanted to reconnect with "earth, self, and people"—I'd felt increasingly alienated from all of them—and I also knew that I personally had no idea how to do that. I realized that I could do it only by joining with others who had answers that I didn't.

I was searching for clarity, role-modeling, and an embodied worldview, one I could live in real life. It would need to be close to the earth, in community with others, free of private automobiles, televisions, consumerism. I wanted to discover and follow the way we as human beings evolved to live, rather than the way we were being forced to live in our increasingly fractured and unsustainable modern world.

In short, I was in a prime demographic to be inspired by a charismatic leader who articulated these things and lived in accordance with this vision—and/or, even if not directly under the sway of the visionary leader myself, to adopt a particular well-defined approach established by that leader that offered answers to all the swirling questions about how to be on this
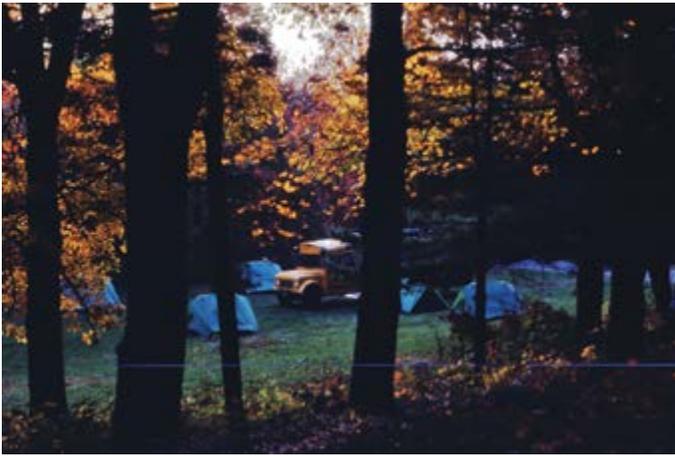
planet. And in two cases, spanning multiple years apiece during this time, I found myself in exactly this situation, where charismatic leadership had been essential in creating and maintaining an extremely unconventional setting that offered sense-making in the face of the nonsensical modern world, clear approaches to life that aimed to be consistent with rather than in conflict with core ecological values, an entirely different realm of experience and community from the widespread (and also seemingly widely accepted) madness of those years.

Both situations could have been labeled by their detractors as "cults," and indeed they shared some characteristics with groups that meet the common definitions of that term (though the concept itself is controversial). They definitely addressed some of the same emotional needs, including sense-making and coherence in a world seeming to lack both; and in both of them, participants were encouraged to surrender authority to a visionary leader and/or to the version of the world and appropriate behavior that that leader laid down. Fortunately, they did not restrict members' ability to leave, nor to communicate with the outside world, nor were they able to entirely censor internal dissension—or, in one case, to even keep enough people "on board" at the same time to ever seem like a truly cohesive rather than conflict-riven group.

In the first situation—a traveling experiential education program and learning community[1]—I became a true believer partly because I felt a need to believe in something, and partly because the worldview we were steeped in made a lot of sense. I still refer to it, and it still affects me, as do all the experiences we had together in this quite radical school-without-walls. Many of its insights about the relationships between "nature, culture, and self"—both what has gone amiss in them, and some pathways to healing—were spot-on. I also see that its approach was riddled with some major holes, including most seriously that its self-righteous and consistently adversarial approach was almost guaranteed to fail in convincing anyone else of its value instead of alienating them. It seemed to require tearing down not only others who were living differently but also each other and our own selves, far more than it encouraged appreciation and acceptance, and it left psychological scars on its participants that only further experiences could start to heal. It brooked little dissent,

aiming for an artificial unity of opinion and outlook that was the opposite of "healthy diversity," the actual key to thriving social and biological ecosystems. Much bullying in favor of the "correct" viewpoints happened, and little effective persuasion was modeled. Despite everything it had "right" in its analysis, it perpetuated its own patterns of oppression.

We were split into several buses, and I rarely encountered or interacted with the charismatic founder (whom I personally did not find particularly charismatic—in talks held when all the groups were together, he came across to me as something of a windbag, no matter how much value his ideas had). Yet the ways of being and of understanding the world that we as a collective had embraced did inspire me, and I took them to even greater lengths than the average participant, immersing myself in nature by sleeping outside even on bone-chilling winter nights when we were on break. I was a "true believer" in this non-cult, and it gave me purpose and meaning and hope, within a collective venture, at a time when the news from Washington, DC was anything but inspiring.

I don't know if this experience would have been possible without the charismatic leadership of its founder, whose drive made this highly unusual program get off the ground, and who recruited all future guides until his own departure from the program, which had been built to the point where it might possibly continue without him (and did).

Yet in the end, he and the program taught many of us how we did **not** want to be as well as how we wanted to be, including lessons we never could have learned if we had not gone through some difficult experiences. Retrospective questioning and clarity were greatly catalyzed by the discovery that, despite strict prohibitions of intimate relationships on the bus aside from those between already-married guides (such as him and his wife), he had been having an ongoing sexual affair with one of his long-time students, who was 33 years younger than him (she'd joined the program when she was 15, and after high school and undergraduate years on this married couple's bus was now an intern with them). He had managed to keep the affair hidden from almost everyone for at least a year since its start, possibly much longer; the hypocrisy and betrayal were so extreme as to be nearly unimaginable to most of us until exposed.

This revelation caused not only his departure from the program but a re-evaluation of much of what he'd offered, taught, advocated for, or insisted upon. In some cases the resulting changes seemed very healthy: the program that emerged from this wholesale questioning respected individuals much more, encouraged diversity of viewpoints, became kinder and gentler in tone, was no longer restricted by the founder's strongly held prejudice against vegetarian diets, and even allowed both individual hugs and "group hugs" rather than frowning upon or banning them completely (supposedly to keep us undistracted from our ecological awareness and mission). In other cases, what had seemed like valuable, core parts of the experience seemed to be lost over time, with the founder's single-minded focus and clear, unquestioned ideas about elements of the curriculum eventually forgotten if not outright rebelled against.

For example, he believed we should all learn and share traditional folk music from the different parts of the country we visited and from different eras in American history (except our own), from old whaling songs to cowboy songs, from Sacred Harp songs to American adaptations of the Child Ballads, from Lead Belly to Woody Guthrie. With radios and recorded music forbidden, we got a break from saturation in contemporary music, and needed to make our own music instead (we all picked up instruments and participated in group sings). Spurred by the founder, we also held regular contra-dances, especially when buses met together, and we formed our own contra-dance band for each one. (For anyone unfamiliar, contra-dancing, a.k.a. New England folk dancing or Appalachian folk dancing, is not to be confused with Iran-Contra, a Reagan-administration-sponsored arms-trafficking operation secretly happening at the same time.)

When I encountered buses in the same program years after the founder's departure, those elements had been lost; traditional music was no longer part of the culture at all. The school year had also been shortened, buses no longer stayed together for a full year (but instead a semester at a time), layers of office-based administration had been added on (the guides previously handled it all from the road; now, office staff greatly outnumbered them), program costs had skyrocketed (to close to 10 times what I'd paid, calculated *per diem*), and overall it had become less "hard core" (for better or worse) and more "within the range of wider acceptability/normalcy" (again, for better or worse).

A similar pattern held with the other charismatic-leader-propelled group I joined during this decade.[2] A couple years after my experience in the traveling eco-education program, I found myself in a project that was trying to put some similar insights about the human relationship to the natural world into practice in one place, a 40-acre wooded site in western Oregon. This was my introduction to Permaculture and much else, including global perspectives on ecological and social crises. The leader had extensive international experience and connections, especially in the less-developed world, and we frequently hosted international visitors, ultimately from nearly every inhabited continent, all of whom were engaged in similar or allied work, seeking to empower their local communities with various permacultural strategies.

This project embodied just as radical a departure from mainstream America as that traveling educational community had; and once again, for me and many participants, the more "hard core" we could be in our efforts to live more ecologically, the better. In fact, our approach was much more integrated and internally consistent on a physical level. My previous group had roamed the country honing our critical environmental and cultural awareness in a fossil-fuel-propelled schoolbus (albeit shared among two dozen of us, who, in our defense, also slept only under the stars, in tents, or under tarps, while, possibly foolishly, forgoing all supplemental heat, even campfires) while consuming factory-farmed food (including meat, at that other founder's and his hand-picked fellow guides' insistence). In this second group, we instead stayed in one place, mostly car-free, eating only our own homegrown organic vegetables and fruits supplemented by mostly-organic staple foods we purchased in bulk (plus, for those who partook, eggs from our own chickens or ducks). The one exception to our dietary near-purity was the charismatic leader's guilty indulgence, ice cream, which was not available organically then and was the justification for our sole freezer. (We had no refrigerator, and even in these days, the entire electric bill for our community of up to a dozen never exceeded $10 per month; later, once we installed a grid-intertied photovoltaic system, the electric company was paying us instead.)

As in that first group, we tended to judge ourselves, each other, and the outside world harshly; most of our efforts were never good enough. And yet we had a cohesive vision, no matter how

riddled with contradictions our daily practice was, and it helped us find purpose and even make meaningful contributions to a world in which we'd each previously felt disempowered. Graduates of the first program went on to catalyze a number of other innovative projects, and this was true of this second group as well; among its other positive effects, it contributed groundbreaking alternative technologies that have had worldwide impact, though largely below-the-radar of mainstream American awareness (except when, for example, profiled in *The New Yorker*[3]).

Instead of exiting voluntarily when the sh*t hit the fan, as the first had, the charismatic leader of this second group was ejected "for cause" by its board of directors before I turned 30. In his case, the reason wasn't a sexual affair with a student-turned-intern or the deception accompanying it, but a liability that was clear to everyone: retaining other nonprofit staff members for any significant length of time proved impossible as long as he wielded power, and despite many pleas from those who cared about him as well as those exasperated by him, he refused all efforts at intervention or mediation. While the first charismatic leader managed to hold together a group of what could be termed "followers"—numbering between 25 and 100 active participants at any one time—for nearly two decades until his downfall, the second one struggled during little more than a decade to maintain a core group on site of even a tenth that size. He consistently alienated and drove away those initially drawn to work with him, as soon as they exerted their own will or expressed differing viewpoints. His apparent need for almost-total control led him to perceive his friends as his "enemies"—starting whenever they first appeared to endanger that control.

His keen intelligence, his articulate expression of a comprehensive vision of the world that made a lot more sense than the senselessness of the mainstream, the fact that he was a doer, not just a talker, his courageous nonconformity, his deep practical knowledge and the connection he seemed to have to the land, all made it very easy to be inspired by him, to want to follow him, to feel deep gratitude and even love for him as a voice of sanity in the wilderness. But fatal flaws in his personality also seemed to make things get ugly quickly whenever he perceived any threat to things going entirely his way; as a consequence, the group was almost always riddled by internal complaints against the leader.

Though I was disturbed by the "undersides" of his character, his winning traits pulled me back in for nearly two years until I realized I'd had enough, that my submission to him and my attempts to excuse his frequent disrespect of others was causing me to disempower myself and contributing to extremely dysfunctional dynamics. As long as my apparent need for an inspiring mentor, my attraction to an archetypal (though often unpopular) charismatic leader, overrode my willingness to recognize how we were all victims of his insecurities, I was an enabler of someone who in addition to being a brilliant teacher and visionary, was also a petty tyrant, and a rather unsuccessful one at that.

Once I myself had been on the receiving end of some of his less savory communications and behavior, and especially once these had multiplied in number and frequency toward many others, I realized I was "done" with this charismatic leader and was not looking to replace him.

It took a group effort to rebuild the first program after the traumatic end of its founder's tenure, and it took an equally strong group effort to dethrone the charismatic leader of this second project (who at one point, in defiance of his eviction notice, ruled over a kingdom of three, himself included, behind a locked driveway gate for nearly a year; the matter was finally settled in court and he left). Meanwhile, I myself had left, returning to that place only several years later once a new era had clearly started.

As was true with the first group as well, the new era brought loss as well as gain; "how to be" was never again as clear, and expanded in directions that seemed more mainstream, less challenging of the status quo, and therefore less adequate to meet the challenges of the still-dire misalignment between dominant society and our home planet. And predictably, some of what the charismatic leader had offered and advocated for was rejected out of hand, seemingly because of its relationship to him rather than strictly on its own merits. (Also likely true was that some had reacted against him initially not primarily because of who he was or his behavior *per se*, but because his worldview and prescriptions for daily living, especially when so assertively presented, seemed to threaten their own familiar habits and comforts.)

As someone who appreciated many of his perspectives and

had relied upon him and his "authority" to keep them front and center in the community, once I returned in this new era I found myself sometimes feeling adrift in this place; I could no longer count on certain "hard lines" being maintained against the encroachment of elements of consumer culture that I'd gone there partly to get away from. Meanwhile, previous dysfunctional communication and power dynamics seemed to recur in new, though usually milder, guises (a story too long to tell in this article, and already told in others).

Having been disillusioned by two charismatic leaders and experienced the deficiencies in the comprehensive solutions they seemed to offer in those confusing years, by the time I turned 30 I found that I'd mostly outgrown idealization of charismatic leaders, as well as any desire to follow a charismatic leader again. Both groups I'd been involved in had also outgrown their periods of being dominated by charismatic leadership.

From here on out, I made sure to heed more carefully the not-so-cryptic advice, "Don't follow leaders, watch the parking meters"[4]—to stay alert to warning signs whenever encountering people who fit the "charismatic leader" profile, to engage with them more judiciously, and to separate myself when a healthy experience was no longer being had. Instead of being drawn in by "lone truth-tellers" and dominant figures who seemed to have all the answers, I found myself attracted much more to diverse, more egalitarian groups, where power was shared, where no one person was dictating what happened, yet a greater wisdom often emerged.

Ultimately, there may be no better way to understand the importance of shared self-empowerment than the experience of giving up one's power in a setting where a single person commands an inordinate amount of it—and then witnessing what happens when the clarity and security that the charismatic leader seemingly offered falls apart, is exposed as the illusion that it is.

It seems natural that charismatic leaders arise in particularly troubled times, and it also seems obvious that they have a role to play in initiating worthwhile projects and in helping create needed change. Most organizations and projects I've been involved with throughout my life depended on some kind of "charismatic leadership" stage—even if a more mild version of it—to get launched in the first place. And every group that has proved viable in the long term has outgrown that stage, rocky and unsettling as that process of change may be.

Today, we're living in what seems like "the 1980s 2.0"—containing (though this would have seemed barely possible back in the '80s) exponentially more absurd and ignorant attacks on the foundations of a plausible human future on this planet (not to mention a viable civil life). If the 1980s were a difficult time to become an adult, I can only imagine what becoming an adult at this current moment would be like.

Practical, inspiring alternatives to the status quo are more necessary now than ever, and I suspect that personal charisma and even well-considered "following of leaders" will play important roles in creating some of the projects we'll need to carry us forward. I also hope we can learn the lessons of past failures in leadership, and remember that we are all leaders, or need to be, if we are going to make it through the times ahead. ❧

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

1. See "Power and Disempowerment on the Ecobus," Communities #148, gen-us.net/power-and-disempowerment-on-the-ecobus.
2. See "More Sustainable Than Thou," Communities #115, simplecirc.com/communities/item/2474/communities-115-summer-2002-the-heart-of-sustainability.
3. See "Hearth Surgery," describing a group which descended directly from this original work: newyorker.com/magazine/2009/12/21/hearth-surgery.
4. Bob Dylan, "Subterranean Homesick Blues," *Bringing It All Back Home*, 1965.

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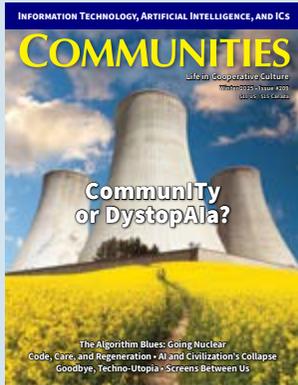**Hierarchical Response to Conflict**

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