

CO-OPS • DISAGREEMENT: THE BEGINNING OF COMMUNITY

COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

Spring 2026 • Issue #210

\$10 US / \$15 Canada

Leadership, Democracy, and Autocracy

Clarifying Consensus

Hierarchical Response to Conflict

Profit, Power, and the Collaborative Home

Charismatic Leaders, Known and Outgrown

Ego and Insecurity: The Enemies of Community



📍 DEXTER, OREGON

THREE PATHWAYS TO TRANSFORMATION

COURSES

We educate youth and adults in the practical application of sustainable living. We take a holistic approach to sustainability. Our Permaculture Design Certificate, immersive Holistic Sustainability Semester, Social Forestry Course, youth learning adventures, and visitor education program offer participants a unique learning experience within our aspiring ecovillage. In collaboration with Nature's Mystery Awareness School, we also offer Eco-Resilience Leadership Training—an opportunity to become more consciously attuned to nature's support that surrounds and sustains us in every moment.

INTERNSHIPS

Lost Valley's internship is a 3-month immersive learning experience where participants have the opportunity to learn and work alongside some of the Pacific Northwest's finest systems thinkers. This is a great option for you if you are in a transitional period, and are looking to make like-minded friends, develop marketable skills, and experience living in community. Food and lodging are included.

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Living in community teaches us to care for and respect one another, communicate compassionately, make decisions together, and see individual needs in the context of the whole. It also reduces resource use through sharing. Residents live in a variety of accommodations throughout our 87 acres. We offer several *Community Experience Weeks* throughout the year to give folks a chance to sample community living.



lostvalley.org



Chris Roth

A Little Too Relevant?

Each recent COMMUNITIES theme has become horrifyingly (or fascinatingly, depending on one's frame of mind) more relevant between the time we announced it to potential authors and the date of publication almost six months later. The current theme, and the articles it generated, are no exception.

A small example: the text in the pull quote on page 44 (preceding, yes, 45-47) was written, with apparent prescience, months ago, before talk of the US annexing Greenland occupied the 24/7 news cycle. Every other piece in this issue also has direct relevance to our current situation and is a reminder that, whatever anyone says to the contrary, we **can** make choices about our own lives and how we engage with one another. In matters of Leadership, Democracy, and Autocracy, we are powerless only if we believe ourselves to be.

"I think the world is going to be saved by millions of small things," Pete Seeger used to say. We are each capable of doing some of those things when we work together. The questions of authority, influence, governance, and power explored in this issue are central to how we navigate the world together—and we make choices about those every minute, whether consciously or by default.

May the stories in this issue and the lessons they offer suggest paths toward a better future. Community in its many forms has never been more essential if we are going to "survive this thing." I hope the insights herein can help us do that even more successfully.

Getting Over Being Tariff-ied

Unfortunately, one realm in which we often do justifiably feel powerless is that of money: specifically, for us, magazine production costs. Due mostly to the current US administration's tariff policies, our paper costs will go up about \$200 per issue starting with #211.

In fact, costs for both printing and postage have risen substantially, in some categories dramatically, since we last adjusted our prices in late 2019. During that time we've nevertheless kept our subscription prices steady in all categories, offering sliding-scale subscription options from "regular" to "supporter" to "sustainer."

We're very grateful that many subscribers have chosen one of the latter categories even when they could have paid less. In fact, many have also made additional donations along with their subscriptions.

Even if all current subscribers paid at the "sustainer" level, subscriptions plus current advertising revenue still wouldn't cover all our expenses. We also depend on donations, including larger donations from various supporters (you know who you are), to keep this vital project going, and to keep it reaching some readers (through

samples and benefactor-supported complimentary subscriptions) who can't afford to pay what the current money economy has decided it "costs."

In other words, COMMUNITIES depends on community to survive—on a shared belief in the value of sharing. Without that broader support, which allows "from each according to their ability to each according to their need" to be a lived reality at least within this corner of the universe, it would fold quickly as a for-profit business.

From a "business" standpoint, however, we are still aiming for three things:

1) Mitigate escalating expenses. Cutting back by four pages in this issue will save us \$165. This seems a reasonable adjustment, with relatively minor impact. Steps we do NOT want to take include reducing issue size further, switching from color to black-and-white printing, or cutting back significantly on sample copies available for events. We don't plan to do any of those things.

2) Maintain or increase income. Here there is more opportunity. When existing subscribers choose to pay at a higher rate, make additional donations, and/or give gift subscriptions, this gives us a substantial boost. Cumulatively, a little more help from everyone adds up to a lot more help in total.

Advertising provides substantial revenue as well, benefiting not only the advertiser (we hope) but readers and our entire publishing project.

And larger donations have been vital in keeping us afloat. While some donors are steady year-to-year, other key donations have been, by design, one-time only. We need to continue to find people and organizational funders who see the value in keeping the magazine going, and are willing to donate to help that happen.

3) Find more readers! You can help us by giving subscriptions to others. You can also help us by spreading the word about the magazine and/or helping distribute free samples (please email editor@gen-us.net to discuss). We print extra copies of each issue in order to increase its readership and impact, including among those who may not yet have encountered it.

We believe the results (what you're holding in your hands, as well as the 209 issues that have preceded it) have been worth the sacrifices, the investment, the work—including much passionate volunteer work, notably that of our authors—that have created it for nearly 55 years now. The money part is a necessary inconvenience that allows us to publish, but what's driving this project are the nonmonetary rewards of sharing stories that, we hope, can make a real difference in the world.

Thanks again for joining us. 🌱

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

Leadership, Democracy, and Autocracy

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Honeybees store nectar on honeycombs. See *Honeybee Democracy* by Thomas D. Seeley, Princeton University Press, 2010. From the book's descriptive text: "Honeybees make decisions collectively—and democratically. Every year, faced with the life-or-death problem of choosing and traveling to a new home, honeybees stake everything on a process that includes collective fact-finding, vigorous debate, and consensus building."

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Letters

Finding (Dis)Agreement

Editor's Note: We received more feedback in response to COMMUNITIES #209, "CommuniTY or DystopAla?" than we can fit in the letters section. What follows is a sample:

I appreciated the article by Kara Huntermoon, "AI and Civilization's Collapse." The current tech blast, including but not limited to AI, seems obviously unsustainable in the physical world long-term and it was nice to see someone else thinks that, too, and explained it so eloquently with research citations included. Digging up every rare earth mineral in the world, and covering millions of acres with freezing data centers and/or burning solar farms to provide what is needed to run this new version of the world? That's a time-limited situation if there ever was one.

I also thought the article by Keenan with ChatGPT ("AI, Wi-Fi, and the Commune") was great to include, most particularly because of the follow-up article that explained more about what I had just read in the original. Even though the first article clearly disclosed the method of writing, I didn't give that much thought, because "and ChatGPT" or "with ChatGPT" are such common phrases everywhere now...not noticing that is a habit that I don't want to have, and I was disappointed to realize that I already do.

The main takeaway for me was the continued importance of reading carefully, thinking critically, and being discerning, none of which I did particularly well while reading the first piece, because I was too busy just nodding along in agreement. But then, when I flipped the page and saw the explanation and realized what was going on, I suddenly got a lot more engaged and attentive. AI is a powerful tool being used for both good and bad and it merits the same caution, care, and attention appropriate for any powerful tool. Being transparent about when it's being used is a basic first step and this two-part piece was a great example of that.

Elizabeth Barr

Nacogdoches, Texas

I really enjoyed Albert Bates' article ("The Algorithm Blues: Going Nuclear"). Thank you for printing it. You asked for feedback about the AI-written article ("AI, Wi-Fi, and the Commune"). I was not impressed. In fact, I was somewhat depressed by learning that a longtime member of Twin Oaks is intellectually lazy enough to use AI to write an article for you. The article was kind of glib and superficial, I thought. Would I have thought that if I didn't know it was AI-generated? Good question. The unstated issue with using AI is its tremendous appetite for energy, which is making it look like we can either have AI or a long-term future for the human race—our fascination with all things digital is a kind of mass autoerotic self-asphyxiation, imho.

Another article that I thought left a lot of important things unsaid was the article about the conflicts involved in privatizing a kibbutz in Israel ("WhatsApp and Email Wars, Happiness, and Community Law" by Dr. Nimi Langer). I would have liked to have seen some acknowledgment of the horror Israel is visiting on its native people, some sign that those involved in writing this article actually have a moral compass. The fact that they did not mention the most important issue facing every Israeli these days leads me to suspect their complicity, which leads me to wonder if COMMUNITIES ought to be printing articles that normalize Israel.

Martin Holsinger

Nashville, Tennessee

We shared Martin's comments with Dr. Nimi Langer, who responded:

From the perspective of happiness and community well-being, October 7, 2023 marked a collapse of the basic conditions that allow communities to exist at all: se-

COMMUNITIES Editorial Policy

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

Through fact, fiction, and opinion, we offer fresh ideas about how to live and work cooperatively, how to solve problems peacefully, and how individual lives can be enhanced by living purposefully with others. We seek contributions that profile community living and why people choose it, descriptions of what's difficult and what works well, news about existing and forming communities, or articles that illuminate community experiences—past and present—offering insights into mainstream cultural issues. We also seek articles about cooperative ventures of all sorts—in workplaces, in neighborhoods, among people sharing common interests—and about “creating community where you are.”

We do not intend to promote one kind of group over another, and take no official position on a community's economic structure, political agenda, spiritual beliefs, environmental issues, or decision-making style. As long as submitted articles are related thematically to community living and/or cooperation, we will consider them for publication. However, we do not publish articles that 1) advocate violent practices, or 2) advocate that a community interfere with its members' right to leave.

Our aim is to be as balanced in our reporting as possible, and whenever we print an article critical of a particular community, we invite that community to respond with its own perspective.

Submissions Policy

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

Advertising Policy

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

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

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

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

What is an “Intentional Community”?

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

curity, trust, and freedom. Communities in southern Israel felt abandoned, left for hours without protection while members and Nova festival dancers were killed and assaulted. When trust erodes and security disappears, well-being becomes impossible and community resilience breaks down, replaced by fear, hatred, and deep mistrust of the other. People in Gaza, referred to by the reader as “natives,” also likely suffer from a profound rupture of trust with their leadership, whose actions have brought devastation to their own communities as well as others. War is always catastrophic for happiness, including for those caught in systems of violence they did not choose, stripping people of safety, agency, and the ability to trust.

The article's focus on internal community conflict and law was a deliberate choice, not an expression of indifference or complicity. Writing about how communities fracture, suffer, and attempt to repair themselves under extreme pressure is not meant to normalize violence or erase suffering, but to examine the fragile human structures that are most damaged by it. There is also responsibility on each of us, within our families and communities, to lift ourselves up and open a small window through which hope and a share of “Shalom” (hi/peace in Hebrew and in Arabic) can enter.

One of the photos in the article shows children from the Malka family in our community planting a tree. Matan Malka is seen from behind, leading the way for his younger brothers. He was a close friend of my son Refael and of many in our community. I still vividly remember him from my son's birthday celebrations, sitting happily around the bonfires at a Crusaders' fortress in the Galilee, where we celebrated together. Ten years later, Matan was killed on October 7 while defending Kibbutz Kisufim. My article is dedicated to his memory. (The accompanying photo shows Matan, standing, at the *Castellum Judin*, modern “Yehiam Fortress,” in 2015.)



Dr. Nimi Langer
Western Galilee, Israel

The Farm's Legacy Revisited

I've written a reflection on Michael Traugot's “The Farm's Legacy Continues” (COMMUNITIES #208), which was a response to my own “A Generation Betrayed: The Spoiled Legacy of The Farm” (COMMUNITIES #205). Michael and I see many things differently and readers can find more details about that here: brothermartin.wordpress.com/2025/10/07/my-response-to-michaels-article-in-communities.

This is not just a historical debate. It offers lessons for people living communally now.

In my perception, The Farm's decision to quit being a politically radical income-sharing community was brought about in part by the success of some of our businesses, and the decision of several of them that they would rather not be financially supporting a radical social experiment. So perhaps modern communards need to make sure that they are in good communication, and agreement, with the operators of their businesses, and that the community is solidly in control of those businesses, so that the situation can't flip to the other way 'round.

I think that our rapid population growth (from 300 to 1500 in less than a decade), without providing newcomers with much proactive education about our practices, agreements, and intentions, trusting that people would just “get it,” contributed to our demise. Intentional communities need to have regular, focused classes/discussion groups, especially for new members, to make sure everyone is on the same page.

(continued on p. 51)

How One Community Led to Another

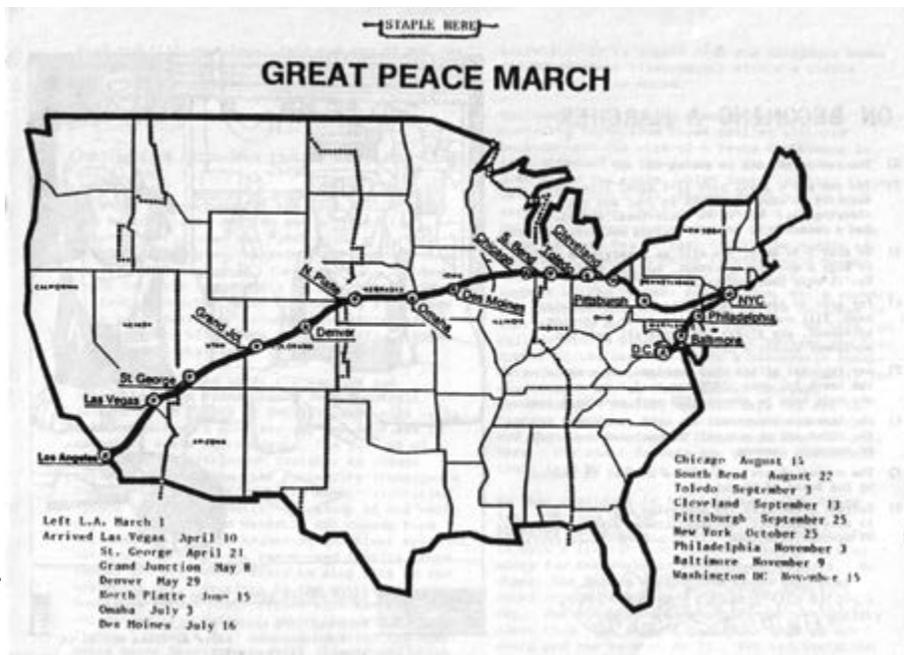
By Tom Atlee

I'd like to share with you how my experience with the mobile community of the Great Peace March across America in 1986 led to and informed the emergence of Walnut Street Co-op's urban intentional community in 2001. That slow accident unfolded through the broader evolution of my life's work with co-intelligence and wise democracy.

To zoom back to Los Angeles, March 1, 1986: The nonprofit ProPeace was launching its giant Great Peace March with about 1200 people (including me), along with

support vehicles (including trailers for personal belongings and porta potties and a mobile kitchen), colorful two-person dome tents donated by The North Face, and four imposing circus tents to serve as mobile community centers, all color-coded to create "neighborhoods" in our mobile "Peace City." The March had been ambitiously planned for 5000 marchers but didn't quite achieve that population. However, I think it was still the largest cross-country political march in US history—a multiplex 3600-mile, eight-month journey.

In a mix of blessing and misfortune, the March "fell apart" after only two weeks of stumbling progress. We'd heard rumors but were surprised when ProPeace suddenly went bankrupt and dissolved. Its visionary founder, David Mixner, helicoptered in to our Mojave desert encampment the day after a major storm sent several tents tumbling away across the sandy flats and downed several marchers with serious hypothermia (saved by full naked body contact in sleeping bags). Mixner warned us to go home, adding that the repo men would



Courtesy of Tom Atlee



Photos by Dan Coogan





Photos by Dan Coogan

come soon to repossess all our support vehicles. It was a biblical, archetypal, totally chaotic scene in the middle of the desert.

As 800 marchers went home, we 400 deserted peaceniks who remained found ourselves confused yet determined to continue...somehow. As if on soap boxes, several of us stood on overturned milk crates preaching this or that solution to our predicament. A big meeting in one of the community tents began with someone saying, “We need a girl to take notes,” triggering grumblings that “it’s gonna be a l-o-n-g march.”

An MX track in nearby Barstow let us hole up for two more weeks of intense dialogue, argument, organizing, and efforts to prepare and get support. Although we were not all truly ready and aligned, a group of several dozen impatient marchers, sick of “all talk and no action,” decided to get going again. The rest of us scrambled to join them.

And so began the watershed event of my life: 400-500 volunteer marchers (only a few of whom were experienced activists) began making their way across

the US with no one in charge. Unbelievably, we successfully addressed our massive logistical challenges (after all, where DO we put 400 people every night for eight months?) and intense conflicts (“If we’re going to walk stretched out in a thin line of hippies instead of all together in a respectable MARCH, I’m outta here!!”). Success shouldn’t have been possible.

• • •

I didn’t know the term “self-organization” back then, but I was seeing it in operation every day. When exhausted kitchen workers put bread and peanut butter out with signs like “You can have something else to eat when we have enough people to make meals and clean up without wiping ourselves out”—they doubled or tripled their team within hours. I was surprised to watch the anarchist contingent, from whom I’d ignorantly expected negativity, behaving as the most cooperative and organized group on the March. Marchers made lists of what needed to be done and other marchers simply did them. When something needed to be attended to, someone almost always attended to it, because it was clearly needed and we all wanted to get to DC. Several of us published newsletters for supporters. People laughed and complained and walked and stowed supplies and found campsites and we kept moving. But no one was following anyone else’s orders and we didn’t allow anyone to throw anyone else off the march.

I’ll give you a humorous example of all this: the Peace City Mayor. As we marched through various communities, police would stop by our encampment and ask to speak to whoever was in charge. It didn’t take long for us to realize how nervous the cops got when we told them, proudly, “Oh, there’s no one in charge here, officer.” Soon a friendly, smart middle-aged marcher declared herself the Mayor of Peace City, with no special powers or unusual roles IN the march. But when cops or other officials showed up, we called upon her to talk with them, and she often scheduled events or arranged

THE GREAT PEACE MARCH FOR GLOBAL NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT, INC.

Statement of Purpose

The Great Peace March for Global Nuclear Disarmament is an abolitionist movement. We believe that great social change comes about when the will of the people becomes focused on a moral imperative. By marching for nine months across the United States, we will create a non-violent focus for positive change; the imperative being that nuclear weapons are politically, socially, economically and morally unjustifiable, and that, in any number, they are unacceptable. It is the responsibility of a democratic government to implement the will of its people, and it is the will of the people of the United States and many other nations to end the nuclear arms race.

Our specific objectives are:

1. A verifiable Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty
2. No militarization of space
3. Enforcement by all governments of the Non-proliferation Treaty
4. Continuous, intensive negotiations between the United States and the U.S.S.R. leading to agreements on nuclear weapons control
5. A 'No-First-Use' pledge by all the nuclear nations of the world
6. A verifiable global freeze on the testing, production, and deployment of all nuclear weapons, missiles and their delivery systems
7. A nuclear-weapons-free Europe and the Pacific
8. Reductions leading to the elimination of nuclear weapons stockpiles
9. Redirection of resources from nuclear weapons manufacture to socially useful fuller employment projects
10. Immediate action directed toward safe disposal of nuclear waste resulting from the manufacture of nuclear weapons

We walk together to call attention to a danger so serious and so urgent that we have given up our jobs and homes, our incomes and comforts for nine months to cross the United States. Our purpose is to educate and to demonstrate our conviction that there is hope and that each individual can make a difference. As citizens of the world it is our responsibility to our children, our planet, and ourselves to eliminate the danger of nuclear war.

We welcome and encourage representatives from peace and justice organizations throughout the world to join us in a dialogue of co-operation and education as an alternative to the rhetoric of confrontation.

We believe that by walking together we will be one step closer to a world free of nuclear weapons, and a world free of war.

to plant "peace poles" in their community and everyone left smiling. She came up with a volunteer role for herself that served everyone.

Our one Native American marcher taught us how to do talking stick circles and the practice spread, becoming our major mode of group dialogue and deliberation. Our little elected "policy board" used it over the objections of our eldest board member, who felt it was too woo-woo compared to traditional majority rules debates. Anyone could attend those meetings, including a fellow who claimed to be Christ and hauled a cross with him during the day, followed by mostly tongue-in-cheek supporters. At one meeting I recall, he declared that his "Father" had abolished our board and we had no power. We acknowledged him and proceeded with our work.

Whenever we walked through a town, some townspeople would join us for a few hours or a day—and some even hung on for a few weeks, amazed at the effective self-organizing spirit of our community, which we called "the magic of the March." Sometimes they joined in our circles. For a great story about that, search for "circles and dress codes" on co-intelligence.org. Our circle-based dialogue culture also helped us resolve the most bitter conflict we faced (which became the prologue to my 2003 book *The Tao of Democracy*): again, search on the co-intelligence.org site for "It All Began in a Fertilizer Factory."

Well, to make a very long and convoluted story short, on November 15, 1986, our ragtag mobile community finally marched into Washington, DC with 1200 people, having talked with thousands of people along the way—and STILL with no one in charge.

That experience changed my life in profound and enduring ways. I'd never seen or been part of anything like it. It was neither a lucrative top-down corporate machine nor an inspired activist group beset with irresolvable clashes over values. It was a vibrant goal-oriented mess that implausibly got things done with passionate, creative ordinary people who cared for each other and the cause that brought them together. There were hundreds of us, all wildly diverse. Somehow it worked.

the Peace March Update

PLEASE COPY AND SHARE THIS NEWSLETTER • ISSUE #1 • MAY 20, 1986 • DIRECT FROM THE GPTAFOND

Eleven Hundred Miles!

1 FEBRUARY 24 - MARCH 1 After our first big hike of 18 miles, we arrive in the rolling lush green hills of Gettysburg Park. We set up our camp and Peace City looks giant, colorful and friendly. We do drills and seminars to prepare ourselves. David Nixner, founder and chairman of 780-Peace, tells us that this will not be the march we thought it would be. We don't have laundry trucks, we don't have the insurance we need, we may have to walk illegally....everything is uncertain. We should reconsider if this is what we want to do and, if not, go home. Holly Near teaches us the song she wrote for the march:

We will have peace.
We will because we must.
We must because we cherish life.
And believe it or not,
Daring as it may seem,
It is not an empty dream.
To walk in a powerful path—
Neither the first nor the last
Great Peace March.
Life is a great and mighty march
Forever for love and for life
On the Great Peace March.



The hum rises from deep within us and with it we wrap around our vision, wrap around our hooting, wrap around our determination to go on. The circle breaks and moves and becomes a joyous circling spiral dance and when a reporter asks a marcher "Isn't the march dead" the marcher points to the dance and says

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Over the next three decades I felt intensely called to explore different ideas and practices for “appreciating, evoking and engaging the wisdom and resourcefulness of the whole on behalf of the whole”—a phrase I now use to describe what I saw on the March. This life project has led me into generative group processes, equitable self-managed companies, vibrant communities, permaculture gardeners, transpartisan political activists, leaderful networks, and more.

I dubbed this new field of study and practice “co-intelligence”—a term for embracing all forms of intelligence through which we can work together wisely with each other and with Life. I tackled theories and practices relating to wholeness, story, participation, politics, wisdom, evolution, power, diversity, inquiry, leadership, co-creativity, spirituality, systems thinking, regenerativity, and much more—all of which have been evolving from year to year.

My two biggest experiences of intentional community—the Great Peace March and the Walnut Street Co-op—are tightly connected to each other through this co-intelligence work. The key link in the chain: 13 years of co-intelligence explorations led me to Jim Rough’s five-day Dynamic Facilitation (DF) training in Port Townsend, Washington in November 1999. I happened to attend it during the same week that the rowdy, self-organizing and fairly successful November 1999 protests against the World Trade Organization dramatically unfolded in the streets of Seattle, right across Puget Sound from my DF training. What I was learning about DF so impressed me that I longed to introduce it to all those street activists I was reading about each day in *The Seattle Times*. I had moved to Eugene, Oregon several months before, so I recruited about eight Eugene activists I barely knew to take Jim’s next DF training in March 2000.

During that training, my new friends fell in love with DF, which I still consider the most potent method for transmuting intense conflict into collaborative shared understanding and action. Then, through a variety of twists and turns, two

of those folks ended up catalyzing the formation of Walnut Street Co-op later in 2000. My partner Karen Mercer and I joined the new co-op in 2001 and, with Kavana Tree Bressen and her then partner, we incorporated the co-op officially in 2003. I’ve lived at the co-op now for 24 years.

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As the members of our community have turned over year after year, the original concentrated energy, experience, and practice of Dynamic Facilitation in the co-op has dissipated. However, several key underlying principles of DF and the Great Peace March have evolved into vital aspects of Walnut Street Co-op’s culture which I, in particular, like to promote:

1. Jim Rough and I came up with the idea of “co-sensing” as an orientation beyond consensus. More than “making agreements,” co-sensing involves feeling our way to-



Photos by Ian Freeman/Ethos

gether in ever-changing environments. Ideally, it happens quietly all the time as something we just do in response to the changing conditions in and around our community. But sometimes a consensus deliberation pulls it all together formally into an agreement. Yet, if we notice that we're not following that agreement, we may decide to review the issue together from a more co-leaderful/co-sensing place, rather than trying to just enforce it because "we all agreed to do X." In this approach, agreements become instances of apparent shared understanding which, when not followed, suggest the shared understanding is not so shared anymore, and should be reviewed as we feel our way together.

2. At Walnut Street we mostly (but not always) use a concerns-centric form of consensus, which involves seriously asking if there are ANY concerns and addressing them until there are no more, which indicates consensus even if we don't "vote." One of the beautiful Aikido-like moves in DF involves handling passionate disruption by asking the disruptive person for their concern, and then addressing that (and so much else) by deep reflective listening—and then asking them something like "If you were Queen of the world, what would you DO about that?," and recording their answers on chart pads for later review. In a fascinating shift, their disruptive energy disperses as the feeling of being heard and taken seriously blossoms. Space gets made for the participatory creativity that naturally emerges later on (in DF). While this full process unfolds often at Walnut Street, just as often we default to unanimous voting (which runs the risk of steamrolling those with quiet concerns).

3. Walnut Street Co-op was founded in Eugene 15 years after the Great Peace March (GPM). Although I'd learned circle process on the March, it had spread quite far in alternative groups and networks by the turn of the century, and early on became central to our co-op's group process culture. Still, it is often just used as a convenient way to have everyone take turns sharing their views on a topic, rather than as a process for tuning into and generating group wisdom. It's one

aspect of the GPM's power that I'd love to see more widely explored in intentional community settings.

4. At our co-op we have stopped using chore charts or mandatory committee assignments (admittedly easier with 10 people than in communities with 100 members, although the GPM had 400 and had no such non-voluntary structures either). To different degrees but fundamentally, we at the co-op all care about each other and the house, an orientation sustained over the years by checking to what extent new housemate prospects share it during our recruitment process. That underlying sensibility sets the stage for lots of self-organizing activity to help make the house work, as well as providing readily available mutual aid and friendship. I used to talk about the GPM as "leaderless," since there was no one in charge, but now I speak of it as "leaderful," because most marchers voluntarily took on roles when they saw or heard about something that was missing. I find this also happens at Walnut Street Co-op, often manifesting in unofficial leadership roles taken on due to situational inspiration or perhaps frustration.

5. A couple of years ago I began thinking that community chores were a subset of a larger category of "contributions." I noticed that chores almost always involve physical and administrative tasks, and occasionally "process roles" like facilitation or mediation. Such forms of contribution were needed in both the GPM and the co-op. But I also observed other forms. Some people spend a lot of time listening to, acknowledging, or engaging with housemates...or laughing and bringing humor into situations...or voicing appreciation for people and conditions that keep our spirits up and inspire our gratitude...or doing "emotional work" managing their own reactivity and passions...or making sure that cookies or snacks are available in common spaces for all...or even voicing cogent but non-judgmental critiques of proposals that are moving too fast...and so on. These behaviors all fall far outside normal understandings of "chores" and "leadership," but they're all fabulous examples of contributions to the well-being of the community, definitely worth acknowledging and nurturing collectively. They were ubiquitous on the GPM.

6. Communication systems constitute a big part of any collective's capacity to self-organize, to lead itself collectively. In the GPM's mobile community I helped establish "Infocom," a sky-blue trailer with typewriters, primitive copying tech, and one or two early desktop computers inside, with outside space for posting announcements. We also used the inside surface of porta potty doors to post notes to each other, since virtually everyone looked at those surfaces at least once each day. At Walnut Street Co-op we have almost a dozen Signal chat groups and a few Google Groups email groups, as well as white boards and refrigerator magnet systems to help us co-sense what's going on and what's needed. And as the GPM also did, the co-op uses newsletters to weave our external support networks into our community's activities and welfare.

7. And then there's the Taoistic form of leadership that almost invisibly creates conditions, asks questions, or truly listens in ways that make good things happen more often without any pushing. As Lao Tzu says in the Tao Te Ching, "When the leader leads well, the people say they did it themselves."

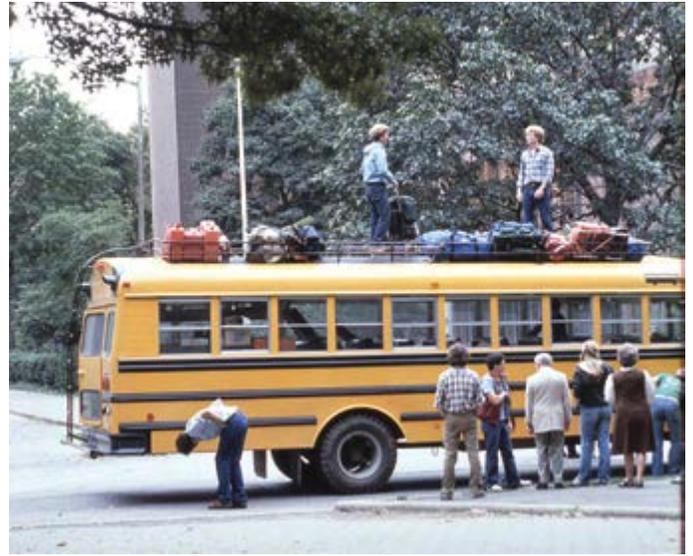
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We never know what kinds of impact will arise from what we do. But we can stay aligned with the life-serving bias of the biosphere and feel our way together into a different kind of future. I have both the GPM and the Walnut Street Co-op to thank for that lesson still being learned... 🐦

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Charismatic Leaders, Known and Outgrown

By Chris Roth



Photos by Nancy 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.

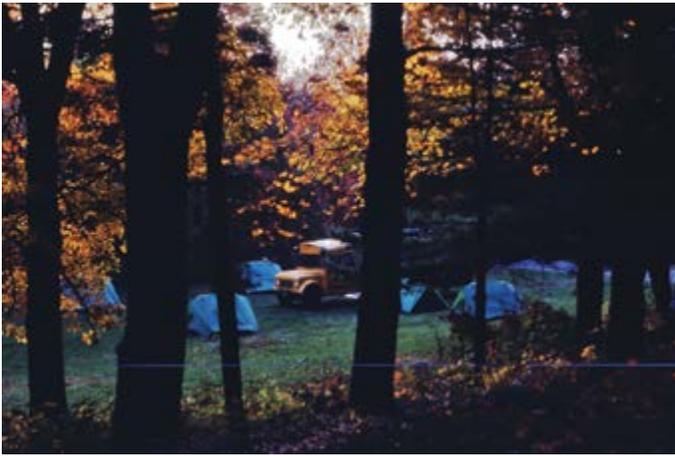
I was 18 at the start of those discouraging Reagan/Bush Sr. years, and 30 when they finally ended. By 18 I had already

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 community¹—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 giv-

ing 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.

Charisma Gained, Charisma Lost

By Martin Holsinger

Stephen Gaskin, the spiritual teacher who inspired The Farm (started in 1971 in Summertown, Tennessee), was also a major contributor to its dissolution as he gradually foundered in his role as our teacher/guru/guide/abbot. His weaknesses gave the whole community a shaky foundation, and his personal failings became more pronounced and consequential over time. I am writing this to give an account of his trajectory, as a cautionary tale for communities which are strongly influenced by charismatic individuals, whether they are formally recognized as “a guru” or not.

While some former Farm members have grown very cynical over his motives for starting the community, I believe he was sincerely trying to make the world a better place.

Stephen framed The Farm, and Monday Night Class before it, as “a teachers’ college.” “I don’t want you to venerate me,” he would caution us. “I want you to learn to do what I’m doing, ’cos there’s so much needs doing that I ain’t gonna be able to do it all... They call colleges where they teach people how to be teachers ‘normal schools.’ OK, we’re an ‘abnormal school,’ but that’s what this is about.”

It all began at a college—San Francisco State, where Stephen taught in the English Department, which was headed by S.I. Hayakawa, the renowned linguistics scholar who went on to become a Republican Senator.

By Stephen’s account, there was good news and bad news in his situation. The good news was that, if he stuck around, he would likely become the next head of the English Department. The bad news was that he felt guilty about being an unpublished author who was nevertheless teaching creative writing.

He started noticing that his favorite students were dropping out and moving to the Haight-Ashbury, so he went to check up on them, tried some of what they were having (LSD), and got his mind blown.

It wasn’t just the drugs—it was the cultural climate. He and his former students and a great many other people were reading everything they could find on subjects like Tibetan Buddhism, the Western Magickal tradition, and the implications of theoretical physics, not to mention general semantics, which Stephen, as a student of S.I. Hayakawa, must

have known well. People were having long, intense discussions about what these sometimes abstruse texts meant in light of their psychedelic experiences—and for their everyday lives.

With so many people seeking enlightenment, others arrived, or arose, to offer it. San Francisco in the late ’60s had gurus a-plenty, Eastern and Western, traditional and self-appointed. Most of them told their students to cut their hair, quit using drugs, and, frequently, abstain from sex. Stephen, who had read the pro-psychedelic, sex-positive works of Aldous Huxley and Alan Watts, felt called to hold the portal open for people to walk the spiritual path as hippies.

In late 1966, Gaskin, who had quit his job as a professor and gone to work for the Post Office, decided to offer a class at San Francisco State’s “free college,” an informal organization for adult education. He called his class “Magic, Einstein, and God,” and started the semester with 12 students, six of whom finished the semester. They enjoyed their time together enough to meet again next semester, changing the name to “North American White Witchcraft” (not a racial reference—compassionate magic as



opposed to selfish/“black” magic), and then to “MetaPE.” The class grew.

By the time I first attended in late 1968, Stephen was calling it “Monday Night Class,” to align with his understanding of Zen—“Don’t make up fancy names. Call it what it is.” (The class met on Monday nights, of course!) A couple of hundred people would gather to meditate and hear him talk about the intersections between, for example, the I Ching, the wisdom of the Sufis, the LSD trip he and his friends had taken on Saturday night, and various encounters and insights he had had in his daily life. He also took questions from the class, some deeply metaphysical and some in the nature of what he called “homework”—the application of spiritual teachings to students’ daily lives. Monday Night Class became a social scene and a loose community.

I was thrilled to find him. He was thinking along the same lines I had been, but was much further along in elaborating and applying that framework. My college studies had focused on understanding what was wrong with America and how to change it, but none of my professors had really been as helpful as I had hoped. Stephen had the stuff.

By 1970, Monday Night Class had grown to around 1500 people. A core group of a couple hundred coalesced into several shared housing arrangements, creating spaces where Gaskin’s teachings, which, in part due to his training in linguistics, focused on clear communication, were practiced by all household members. Stephen found that his teaching experience and per-

sona were helpful in guiding people to learn how to arrive at the high level of agreement that is necessary in order for community living situations to work.

In the midst of this, Stephen and his partner took the radical, psychedelically-fueled step of joining with another couple in what they called a “four-marriage.” This intensified his already intense energy. Several of the other couples in his informal inner circle soon did the same. They found that it was a good way to break out of the “he said/she said” dead end of dyadic dynamics. Stephen was definitely on a roll. He was not just the teacher of Monday Night Class; he was a frequently outspoken major player in the San Francisco hippie community. (One now-cynical member of his inner circle commented, “Everybody in the San Francisco scene hated him, so he left for Tennessee.”) Speaking extemporaneously and without a microphone, he easily held the attention of the crowd that filled The Family Dog dance hall to hear him on Monday nights. He had acquired *charisma*.¹

A great many of us saw him as possibly “the Aquarian Avatar”—potentially the next Jesus, Buddha, or Mohammad. Then he announced that he had been invited by ministers and college chaplains from around the US to speak in their towns, and so was going to adjourn the class. He would be traveling in the schoolbus-converted-to-a-camper that his he and his family were living in after shedding their apartment, a transition that other class members had also made. Many of them asked if they could join him on the trip. He said yes. Others bought buses for the occasion, and so Stephen left San Francisco with 30-40 vehicles carrying a couple of hundred people, in what we referred to as “The Caravan,” a living example of what he was teaching. I was not among them, but I quickly realized that the class, not the city of San Francisco, was the center of my life, and joined them.

We had set out in October, on Columbus Day, and returned in late February, with about twice as many people and vehicles as we had departed with, to find the city didn’t feel like home any more. Stephen had frequently expressed interest in creating a community in the country, a place where people who were frazzled by city energy could ground in the healing power of the natural world, but land in California was already prohibitively expensive. Land in Tennessee, we had found when he spoke at Vanderbilt University, was much more affordable, and the people we had met seemed friendly, so we headed back to Tennessee, where, after a few months, we found the land that became The Farm.

During these months, and the years that immediately followed, our relationships with him continued largely as they had in San Francisco. His door was open to those who needed personal guidance. While we no longer had “Monday Night Classes,” we all gathered with him on Sunday mornings to meditate, after which he would speak and take questions, and leave us all feeling inspired. During the week he circulated through the community, and, wherever he paused to connect with somebody, a circle of people would gather around him to hear what wisdom he had to offer and ask questions of their own. He was invariably insightful, honest, and unstinting with his time and attention, though he was not all “warm



Photos courtesy of Martin Holsinger



fuzzies.” Sometimes he dealt out what we have since come to call “tough love.”

But, over the course of the '70s, his personal involvement with community members gradually attenuated. Our rapid increase in population, which he strongly encouraged, was a contributing factor. He shifted from being everybody's personal advisor to being a motivational speaker and a roving ambassador as we made common cause with Indigenous Americans, the anti-nuclear movement, and inner-city African Americans, pursuing our common vision of a more just, less corporate America.

He also shifted more and more of the decisions about the running of the community onto others, although he remained the final arbiter of disagreements that couldn't be solved otherwise and would occasionally intervene on his own. While at first he had appointed crew chiefs, as time went on, people also became crew chiefs through informal consensus. (“Crew” was our term for people who worked together, such as our auto mechanics, farmers, carpenters, medical personnel, laundry, etc.)

Stephen frequently cautioned us that he was “an amateur,” an “*espontaneo*,” the Spanish term for somebody watching a bullfight who gets so excited that they jump in the ring to take on the bull. Most *espontaneos* get gored, and Stephen, ultimately, was no exception. He had had no training in being a guru, nor had he ever been the devotee/student of another spiritual teacher. In cultures where spiritual teachers/gurus have a recognized role, such as India and Tibet, it takes decades of study and meditation with a master before that master empowers his student to teach. Stephen was proud of the fact that nobody had ever “punched his ticket,” as he put it, but his pride blinded him to what he was missing by not having anyone in his life that he regarded as his mentor.

As time went on, more and more of us had interactions with Stephen that went **clunk**, instead of **flash!** One of the most widespread and public of those came after John Lennon's assassination in December 1980. Stephen had attached a great deal of magical significance to the Beatles and their music, and had never forgiven what he saw as Yoko Ono breaking up the band through her influence on John. The Sunday morning after Lennon's death, someone suggested a moment of silence in Lennon's honor. Stephen's reply was dismissive. I could feel a wave of shock and disappointment ripple through the crowd. It was not long after that that attendance at this, our only regular community gathering, started dropping off.

Another of Stephen's major public gaffes came when he proclaimed that “you can't blow your mind once a week and keep it together to do anything serious the rest of the time.” This was not just a theoretical reversal of his high esteem for psychedelics. Our crew in Guatemala, which was working hard to spread medical care, education, running water, village-level soy technology, and psychedelic rock music among the people of the Guatemalan Highlands, was also partaking liberally of the region's widespread wild psilocybin mushrooms, and his remarks left them indignant.

Several members of The Farm Band/The NRC have commented that, the longer they were in close association with him, the less they appreciated him.

His overconfidence in his own judgment also led him, I believe, to choose poor advisors. Over the years, the people who had been close to him in San Francisco quit connecting with him regularly, while he relied more and more on one individual who served as

his agent and publicist. In retrospect, they seem to have given Stephen poor advice and led him further out of touch with the daily life of the community.

One example is Stephen's appearance on The Phil Donahue show. We saw this opportunity as our big break, a chance to get the attention of mainstream America with our message of sharing and voluntary simplicity. Instead, Donahue focused on some of the more sensational aspects of what we were doing, such as Stephen's four-marriage. Stephen, reportedly on the advice of his publicist, was combative in response, things did not go well, and no more invitations to network television were forthcoming.

In “Edward Snowden and The Farm,”² I have extensively explored the question of whether this was just bad advice, or the work of a COINTELPRO infiltrator. One of the US “intelligence” services' main tactics for breaking up groups that might threaten the status quo is to send in somebody who at first does good, reliable work for the group and its leader, and then steers the leader, and the group, wrongly, leading to dissension and often to breakup.

Another instance of Stephen's overconfidence that was fed by this individual and that lowered others' confidence in him was the so-called “shootout at the tractor barn.” Here's the story.

We did not have a building large enough to hold us all, but we did have our own internal cable television system. On rainy Sunday mornings, Stephen would show up at the studio, speak for a while, and respond to phoned-in questions (We had our own phone system, too.) On this particular Sunday morning, Stephen preached that we needed to take on more people, at a time when members were feel-

ing increasingly stressed by our crowded living situation.

The head of the Farming Crew, “Doug” (not his name), called in to suggest that maybe we should take better care of who was already here before taking on any more people, and we all witnessed Stephen simply lose it, on live TV, saying no, we couldn’t do that. The Sunday Service ended abruptly. I don’t think anybody felt inspired.

On Monday morning, Stephen and his publicity person arrived at “the tractor barn,” the Farming crew headquarters, bright and early, and had a loud, heated discussion with Doug and some other crew members. (I was running late and missed it.) The result was that Doug and his wife, who was one of the community’s midwives, soon departed.

These incidents, and many others, had a cascading effect. An increasing number of adults in the community began to doubt his wisdom. This was reflected in the drop in attendance at Sunday Service that I mentioned. After privatization, participation dropped to a few dozen, and Stephen soon joined the non-attendees. He had lost his charisma. 🍷

Martin Holsinger lived on The Farm from 1971 to 1990. Since then, he has been involved in two other communities, and now lives with his partner and two other people in the woods near Nashville, where they do what they can to foster the same values that underlay The Farm: community, voluntary simplicity, and experiential spirituality. He has written an unpublished critical history of the community, is working on his memoirs, can be found on MeWe and Facebook, and blogs at The Deep Green Perspective, brothermartin.wordpress.com. See also his article “A Generation Betrayed: The Spoiled Legacy of The Farm” (COMMUNITIES #205, Winter 2024, pages 26-34), and a longer version of some of this same material at brothermartin.wordpress.com/a-generation-betrayed (comprising two parts, “Money Worries” and “Wherever He Goes the People All Complain”).

1. The American Heritage Dictionary defines charisma thus: 1. A rare personal quality attributed to leaders who arouse fervent popular devotion and enthusiasm. 2. Personal magnetism or charm.
2. brothermartin.wordpress.com/2015/08/26/edward-snowden-and-the-farm-v-3-0-coup-detat.

Sex and the Singular Spiritual Teacher

One common aspect of charisma is sexual attractiveness. This goes way back in our history—primatologists point out that “trophy mating” with the alpha male is common in many primate species: the females gain status by mating with the alpha, but do not expect him to be monogamous or help raise his children.

More recently, we have the “groupie” phenomenon, in which young women seek one-night stands with their favorite rock stars.

Stephen’s charismatic ministry arose in the “free love” atmosphere of San Francisco in the late ‘60s, and was informed by, among many other influences, Wilhelm Reich’s view that mental neurosis and sexual inhibition are interlocking phenomena—or as George Clinton put it, “Free your mind and your ass will follow”...and vice-versa.

While he was no George Clinton, Stephen was definitely a rock star. It should come as no surprise that, like other rock stars, he attracted groupies. As a spiritual teacher rather than a musician, he offered not just the healing value of intimacy, but also wisdom and insight.

His sexual involvement with female students is not well-documented. There are only a few stories floating around in online Farm discussion groups, but from what I have been told it appears to have been a part of Stephen’s teaching repertoire from early on, and to have become somewhat common on The Farm.

It was widely known in the community that women who were not getting along well with their husbands would go to Stephen for hands-on therapy. This is not so strange when we consider that “sexual surrogacy” has become a recognized, albeit controversial, adjunct to sex therapy. (Nobody on The Farm offered this for men.)

According to recent revelations, Stephen also seems to have expected his “personal assistants,” young women (hey, we were all young!) who helped him answer his mail and do other secretarial duties, to be open to his advances. That is not something that I was aware of at the time. While his intimacy with women besides his three wives almost certainly started as inspired spontaneity, his undisciplined ego came to expect that women would want him, and to miss signs that they did not. However, I have not heard of him actually forcing himself on anybody. He also does not seem to have impregnated anyone he wasn’t married to. (The only birth control we used was women keeping track of their fertility.)

I think we need to consider a broader context to really understand his behavior. Our culture has a very strong idea that there are rules about certain aspects of sex, such as that it is always wrong for teachers, especially spiritual ones, to be sexually intimate with their students. I think that accepting this as a rule is as misguided as accepting “marriage is between one man and one woman” as a rule. When it comes to love and intimacy, guidelines are more realistic than rules, and we should understand that intimacy between teacher and student may, or may not, be appropriate, depending on the circumstances. (Speaking of “guidelines vs. rules,” as far as I can tell, Stephen did not engage sexually with women who were under 18.)

The whole question of Stephen’s intimate involvement with his female students is not a subject which I, as a man, can readily research. There are things women speak about with other women much more readily than they do with men. Going back to the rules vs. guidelines question, I have to wonder how many of those who initially appreciated their sexual sessions with Stephen ended up changing their minds due to social pressure or their disappointment with Stephen’s fading charisma and deciding that they had been exploited. There were probably also women who gave in to his expectations while feeling exploited. It’s pretty clear that, if one partner in a sexual encounter feels exploited, there will be no healing energy transmitted.

I am also aware of women who voluntarily engaged intimately with him after his fall, and were seriously disappointed by their experience, so it seems that at some point his ability to transmit healing energy through intimacy left him. That’s what happens to spiritual teachers who don’t take care of their own bad habits.

When the privatization coup took place, Stephen threatened to raise a general rebellion. The head of the privatizers told him, “If you do that, we know enough about you to take you to court and take you to the cleaners,” apparently referring to the potential testimony of women who had been intimate with Stephen and were unhappy about it. Stephen sat down and shut up. His charisma was gone.

—MH

Disagreement Is the Beginning of Community

By Dave Booda

It's such a simple thing.

A disagreement.

You have one perspective, I have another. We could agree to disagree. And yet, depending on how consequential the difference is, conflict may arise.

Maybe I love avocados but you find the texture repulsive. That's manageable. Maybe you love top-40 country music and I think most of it is cookie-cutter garbage. That's not ideal if we're on a long road trip together, but we'll be fine.

But what if we have different religious beliefs? What if I think that you believing in your definition of God will result in eternal damnation? What if we disagree on how to discipline our kids and we live next door to each other? What if we support different politicians, and what if you believe my support for a chosen politician constitutes bad judgment, or even harm towards our fellow citizens?

What happens when it's okay to disagree about things like music, but it's not okay to disagree about issues when the stakes are higher? I'd like to explore our current state of affairs, what happens when we can't disagree, and why healthy conflict is an essential ingredient to a healthy community.

Technology and Conflict Avoidance

If there's one thing we seem to all agree on, it's that our current culture is more polarized and divided than it has been in a long time. Our patience with and respect for people who don't share our beliefs has waned, and as a result our ability to be with interpersonal conflict has degraded.

Thanks to innovation and technology, we have more opportunity to avoid conflict than ever before in human history. The more of our lives we spend online, the less we have to wrestle with the frustrating, yet necessary task of relating with people we don't agree with. Our communities, once based on physical proximity, are being slowly replaced by affiliations defined by moral proximity. As the internet divides us into different sub-groups based on our interests, we are left with the impression that our viewpoint isn't just the majority, but that anyone who doesn't see things our way must be an idiot, uninformed, or both.

Being in groups of people who share our values can be useful, but if that's all we're exposed to our intellectual and emotional immune systems become weak. Our egos become even more fragile, and what used to be something uncomfortable, but that we could work through, is now an affront to our sensibilities, a reason for outrage or even a relational boundary we must impose. The less we are exposed to new ideas and contrary points of view, the less resilient our minds become.

Furthermore, conflict in an online reality is fundamentally different from conflict in real life. If we encounter people we don't agree with online it's easy to simply click away, or if we choose to engage, to do it in a way that's essentially anonymous and detached from our humanity. It takes far less courage to leave a comment on Facebook than to say the same thing to someone's face, or in a group of people. There's very little skin in the game when we're behind a keyboard. The idea of "confronting someone online" can sound courageous, but when seen from a larger perspective, it's no more courageous than yelling at someone out your car window as you drive by.

People who think differently than you are not the enemy; they are an asset. They hold the keys to your intellectual wholeness in ways that you can't even imagine.

When Disagreement Isn't an Option

When we don't have the ability or the capacity to disagree with people—to sit with and accept the simple fact that we see the world differently—we are left with no choice but to make other people wrong, and it just gets worse from there.

It's almost as if when someone disagrees with us, a “gap” gets created. Now, we could simply allow this gap to exist, or even welcome it. Our disagreement may have consequences for how we can (or can't) dance together in life, and some of that may be a bummer, but making peace with that gap is absolutely an option.

If we can't do that, for whatever reason, that's when things start to get squirrely. We rush to fill that gap with meaning, explanations, or stories. Some of the ways we do this are relatively benign. We may believe “they just don't get it,” and maybe we're right. We may say or think things like:

They just don't have enough experience.

They are too young to understand.

They are too old to understand.

They haven't “seen the light” yet.

We don't recognize their viewpoint as containing wisdom (at least not as much

as ours) so we explain that away. A step toward a less civil direction would be to assign negative attributes to that person or see them as “broken.”

They are clearly wounded.

You know Jenny...she's always been a bit racist.

Bennie is just an asshole.

If we continued in a more violent direction, we could attribute malice to their viewpoint and construct stories that fit that narrative.

She is out to get me.

He just wants to destroy this community.

They have no empathy! Probably a narcissist.

Now, instead of working to understand the other person's point of view, we have a diagnosis that we can use to build a case against them. If someone is a true narcissist, or if they are actually out to destroy someone, the actions to be taken are simple. They are the bad guys and must be stopped by us, the good guys.

Are there times when people are absolutely unreasonable and need to be stopped with force? Unfortunately, yes. However, what's more common is that we take a disagreement and round it up to malice. Alternatively, we can choose to accept that disagreement (even on sensitive topics) is just part of the human experience. When we do, we start to build resilient communities that contain people from different walks of life and represent diverse skills and viewpoints.

We Need More Conflict, Not Less

William Ury, the author of *Getting to Yes* and one of the most respected negotiators alive, has said that he believes we need more conflict, not less. What he's saying is that we need to address our differences and our disagreements in an intentional and healthy way, because when we don't—that's when the kind of conflict we're trying to avoid inevitably happens. This simple shift in thinking can be easy to overlook, but it has the power to transform a group and establish a culture where we are aware and present to the value of our differences.

Let's take a minute and imagine your ideal community. Maybe it's a small group, maybe it's large, maybe folks are living together, or maybe you gather together a cou-



ple times a week. What does it feel like? What are some of its characteristics?

One thing most people will imagine is that everyone is “on the same page,” and to a certain extent, that has to be the case. If there’s nothing we agree on and no basis for coming together it won’t work. However, how many of us imagine an ideal community, then fantasize about a group of people who all think differently and require hours and hours of meetings to find agreement?

One of my favorite aphorisms from the Intentional Communities movement is the saying “the smartest person in the room is the group,” but that’s not easy, or quick. To activate the wisdom of the group we need everyone to bring their individual perspective, for those perspectives to have variety (or even contradict), and for each of those perspectives to be respected and considered. That’s so much work! It would be much simpler to have a charismatic person convince everyone of their way, then silence the people who disagree. That of course, is a sign of cult dynamics.

From the outside, cults and communities look very similar. We might all sing the same songs, worship the same god, or even wear the same tee shirts, but that doesn’t make something a cult. The thing that differentiates a cult from a community is their capacity for disagreement while still maintaining a strong bond. To what extent can a group handle different points of view? How much are those voices silenced or respected? What repercussions are there for having a dissenting point of view from the group majority? Communities have a high capacity for disagreement; cults have a very low capacity.

Thank You for Disagreeing

If there’s one thing I’d like you to take away from this essay, it’s this idea. The health of any community can be measured by their relationship to disagreement. The same could be said about a romantic relationship, a business partnership, or any relationship where the goal is a high degree of trust and collaboration.

While I completely understand that it’s not always fun to have long meetings, deal with people’s stubbornness, and really put the effort in to listen and hear people out—the other option is worse. Anyone who has lived in community more than a few years has seen what happens when you unnecessarily rush a decision—you pay for it down the road. The same is true when we don’t get our ideas challenged: our minds get weaker.

People who think differently than you are not the enemy; they are an asset. They hold the keys to your intellectual wholeness in ways that you can’t even imagine. Today I spent time in New York City with my cousin and we talked about the New York City mayoral race between Zohran Mamdani and Andrew Cuomo. I told him I liked Mamdani and he gave me a bunch of reasons why Mamdani might be bad for the city. I was interested in his point of view, because most of my friends love Mamdani so I don’t often hear intelligent pushback. I listened and took in what he was saying. At the end of the conversation my cousin said to me, “Wow, you’re really easy to talk to about this,” which actually surprised me. I was genuinely interested in his perspective, so naturally I listened and was curious. I’m not a saint, I’m just someone who is interested in learning, and in that moment, my cousin had a perspective on the situation that I didn’t have.

One of the reasons I can listen to someone I disagree with is that I don’t think disagreement is a problem. We can definitely still be friends. In fact, I get excited when I meet someone who has a completely different viewpoint and is willing to sit with me and explain it in-depth. Due to the fact that I don’t think disagreement is a problem, I also don’t

feel like I have to change my opinions to have good relations with them.

Some might hear my approach to disagreement and think I’m suggesting we should give in to other people’s point of view, but I believe it’s the opposite. Yes, there are times when listening to other people will influence our opinion, but when we welcome disagreement in others we’re also sending an important message to ourselves. We’re acknowledging that it’s okay for us to have an opinion that creates friction. We’re saying that our conviction is not something to be scared of, but something to be proud of and shared. While I don’t always love it when I’m the only one in a group who thinks a certain way, I fundamentally believe that I’m still welcome and I don’t have to change my opinion just to fit in. That all comes from a healthy relationship to disagreement.

But hey, that’s just my opinion. You are welcome to disagree! 🐦

Dave Booda is a writer, musician, and social entrepreneur. He cofounded Intimacy Fest (intimacyfest.com) and hosts The Darkness Experiment (darknessexperiment.com), a five-day relational retreat in the complete dark. He has led over 450 workshops on connection, touch, and relationships and has consulted for and facilitated experiences for companies, communities, retreats, festivals, conferences, birthday parties, weddings, funerals, and gatherings of all kinds—with the intention to inspire authenticity, connection, and group cohesion. He has published over 200 essays for boodaism.com and played over 1000 shows as a touring singer/songwriter. He is a former Naval Officer and graduate of the US Naval Academy, currently serving on the board of directors for the Foundation for Intentional Community and living in San Diego, California. Dave can be reached at dave@ic.org.



Clarifying Consensus

By Marty Klaif

I recently came across the article “Consensus and Sociocracy—Explained” by Jerry Koch-Gonzalez and Ted Rau in *COMMUNITIES* #204 (Fall 2024). My first reaction was that this could be interesting, as I have not been clear on the substantive differences between the two as used in intentional communities. The overriding purpose of each is to reach the best decision on issues before the community. Each arrives at their decisions by reaching consensus agreement on a level defined by the application of its process.

I have been a practitioner and proponent of Consensus process for intentional communities since I first become involved with the Foundation for Intentional Community around 2000 and saw it in practice—particularly, at that time, facilitated by Caroline Estes. Caroline cofounded Alpha Farm in Oregon in 1972, bringing her Quaker faith and its longstanding tradition of collective decision-making process with her. She adapted that process to the secular world she had moved into—never losing, among other basic principles, the belief that everyone holds a piece of the truth. I’m pretty sure that all, or almost all, intentional community Consensus process facilitators and trainers trace back to Caroline.

I subsequently attended a several-days training course with Caroline based at Alpha Farm. A few years after that, I participated in an extended training offered by Laird Schaub, who was one of Caroline’s students and always thought of her as a mentor. A Consensus process evangelist, he brought his own style and nuance to the party. Meanwhile, both as an FIC board member and in my own community, I had lots of opportunity to refine and practice the process as appropriate to those settings.

A process nerd, I was curious about Sociocracy as it was introduced to, and adopted by, many intentional communities, so I attended a variety of introductory online sessions. I also attended a 12-session training course by Diana Leafe Christian, which introduced me to a couple of ideas that I thought worthy of incorporating in my community’s version of Consensus.

My biggest takeaway from each of the trainings I attended was that comparisons made to Consensus process always contrasted a hyperbolized worst of Consensus process to the purity of Sociocracy process at its best. It all made me wonder why, if Sociocracy is such a great system, do they need to engage in that kind of sophistry? It has certainly gained an enthusiastic constituency and from what I learned seemed a reasonable choice.

Attending those sessions does not make me an expert in Sociocracy. One thing I do know is that in contrast to the spiritual foundation of Consensus process, Sociocracy evolved over an extended period finding basis in social sciences and business. It describes an alternative governance method using a defined bureaucratic structure. We can each decide if the subtle implications of that difference are meaningful in reaching agreements in the context of intentional community.

My goal here is not to contribute to a “my process is better than your process” debate. My goal is to present a more balanced understanding of Consensus process than appears in the referenced article.

Sociocracy also embraces the concept of consensus at the various levels using the term “consent,” defined by Jerry and Ted as an absence of objection. In contrast, Consensus process looks for active agreement. Each individual who consenses in any instance reaches that decision through one of a variety of internal processes. They can be active proponents; they can be supportive of the initiative even if not an active proponent; they can “read the room” and grok what the will of the community is; they can advocate for a sunset clause for the proposal, triggering review at a specific time. There is also the op-

tion to “stand aside,” which expresses that there is not agreement on the proposal but an understanding that it does not represent a threat to the community or the basic principles and values it represents. Standing aside also carries a commitment to abide by the agreement reached.

I have a general belief that orthodoxy in almost any belief system is sure to encounter contradictions that result in arbitrary rejection of creativity. The assertion in the referenced article that in Consensus process, “everyone decides everything together,” making the process unwieldy, was made in every Sociocracy presentation that I witnessed. That looks to me like both an assumption of orthodoxy and a gross oversimplification. In practice, there is a great deal of flexibility in Consensus process when it is well designed and facilitated. No process works well when it is not run with creativity to respond to context and good understanding of the underlying principles.

In my community we have 21 committees, some with subcommittees as needed, that deal with specific areas. Not all are active at all times; for example, our pet committee remains dormant unless there is an active issue. All committees are empowered to make decisions that they judge do not need whole community (plenary) consensus. Issues of consequence are, as a rule, brought to the plenary for discussion so the committee

No process works well when it is not run with creativity to respond to context.

can get a full understanding of the concerns of the community. The committee then has the discretion of making a decision on the issue or deciding that it should be brought back to plenary for a group consensus. Significant committee decisions are reported on the monthly meeting agenda and members have a week to object and send the issue back to committee for further consideration—this rarely happens. This structure allows our monthly meeting plenaries to focus on significant community-wide decisions and values-based discussions. And it belies the statement “everyone decides everything together,” which is at the core of the Sociocratic criticism of Consensus process—and is just a false assertion.

I would be the first to acknowledge that Consensus practice requires patience when there is a decision that is judged to require plenary consensus. But respect for each individual and the piece of the truth that they carry, and the consideration given to their views, engender greater buy-in to the decision reached. By the time a proposal comes to the plenary it

has been brought to life in committee, come to monthly meeting to elicit concerns, and received further consideration in committee to craft a proposal. In my community, committee meetings are open to anyone who has interest in an issue before the committee. Proposals that make it to plenary level are, therefore, well-crafted and generally well-received.

Consensus-based communities also generally have a contingency if consensus cannot be achieved. In my community, as a backup, we can vote if it is apparent after two consecutive meetings that consensus cannot be attained. In 51 years we have, to my knowledge, needed to vote four to six times (we don't have an official record).

I hope this adds to a better understanding of some of the pieces of Consensus process. While the example is from my own community, it expresses the basic tenets of the process as applied to any particular environment. 🌊

Marty Klaif has been on the Board of the FIC for about 20 years serving in many capacities including the Ministry Committee. He lived in a non-consensus-practicing, urban community (Kerista) for 15 years and has been in his current community, Shannon Farm, for 24 years. There, he has been part of the Process Committee which has developed and done internal trainings for the current version of Consensus the community uses. He also helps develop new facilitators. Between those community experiences, he was a cofounder of the Network for a New Culture.

For a flow chart illustrating how a consensus group can use committees to turn proposal ideas into proposals for the whole group, see gen-us.net/consensusflow.

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Ego and Insecurity: The Enemies of Community (A Case Study in Self-Disenfranchisement)

By Chris Roth

Why would any group willingly give up democracy? Why would members ever choose knowingly to disenfranchise themselves—to surrender their own right to vote?

These questions have been puzzling me for more than 15 years, ever since this happened in a group I was closely connected to. It probably goes without saying that these same questions are even more relevant today, with democratic institutions under attack all around the world. This includes especially the US, where the norms and assumptions most of us have been operating under for decades have proven increasingly shaky, where the limits of autocracy and submission, self-inflation and self-abasement, are being tested in ways unprecedented in this country.

A conclusive postmortem on this group's abandonment of democracy never happened, and I myself don't have certain answers. Although I offer some impressions and intuitions in this article, I am not a licensed psychologist, nor did I feel a deep understanding of any of the principle agents of this change. These events also happened during a time of disruption not only in our group's culture and composition but in the wider world, amidst the 2008 financial crisis and its fallout. We found ourselves dealing with larger economic and social stresses beyond our control, quite independent of any internal challenges with group process or interpersonal connection. The fact that we were "missing each other," and that retrospectively, our interpretations of the events may differ, may be unsurprising given the circumstances.

Nevertheless, I do have some ideas about why it all happened. In the interests of protecting identity and emphasizing that this is one person's necessarily simplified version of the tale, I will give the key players pseudonyms, each tied to an archetypal role that they seemed to be playing, even if beneath the surface, and in the rest of their lives, there was much more to them than that. If any of them ever reads this article, I hope they'll forgive any oversimplifications, and take this for what it is—an attempt to convey what I experienced and how I tried, and still try, to make sense of it.

Many others of us played supporting/enabling roles in the fiasco that unfolded, whose end point was the collapse of the group as it then existed. Yet five people had outsize influence in our organization's shift from democracy—practiced as consensus of all full members—to oligarchy—rule in the most important matters by a self-electing few—with apparent near-kakistocracy, government by the least competent, quickly following. These five also all fled once the damage had been done, as did many other members, leaving a few persistent old-timers and a greater number of new arrivals to reinvent the place from the ashes of its collapse.

Those key players were:

Barry the Bureaucrat

Barry's previous experience had not included intentional community. He'd worked for many years as a US government administrator in Washington, DC, eventually tiring of

I and likely everyone else in my boat felt powerless to halt what seemed inevitable, the foregone conclusion that this governance change was going to happen, that it needed to happen to prevent far worse outcomes. The experts were telling us so.



that life and seeking something new. However, as the saying goes, “You can take the man out of the bureaucracy, but you can’t take the bureaucracy out of the man.” This was not immediately evident, as Barry upon arrival seemed a quite friendly person, happy to be in community, and appreciated for his musicality, often jamming on various stringed instruments with others. It was only once Barry started stepping back into his previous type of role and its accompanying mindset that the problems arose.

Lisa the Lawyer

Lisa also arrived without any intentional community experience. She had studied and practiced law years ago, but was no longer practicing. Her most recent work experience had been in a presidential library in Texas. While a background working with a family that had manufactured foreign wars on false pretenses was enough to raise many inner eyebrows, she appeared to have disavowed that line of work by moving to the community, and also seemed a sociable, even open-minded person in this new environment. However, as the saying goes, “You can take the lawyer out of the law school, but you can’t take the law school out of the lawyer.” Lisa and Barry eventually found much in common in their struggles to adapt to the brave new world of intentional community.

Edwin the Entrepreneur

Unlike the others in this group, Edwin had been involved with the community for a number of years. He was well-established socially in the group, had been working to support core parts of our ecological and educational missions, and shared many common community values. His main area of divergence from established norms seemed to be pay—he disagreed with the community’s flat pay structure and wanted to make more money than others who were doing work that in his mind carried less responsibility and required less training and skill than his did. He believed that the community’s inclusive consensus process, in which the plenary (which included strong advocates of equal pay for all) had ultimate decision-making power, was an obstacle to differential pay. Seeing the four other members of this group as allies in his efforts to change things, he benefited from his pre-existing social capital and was able to lend some of it to them by association.

Vance the Volunteer

Edwin actively recruited a non-group-member into an advisory role for the community after finding a number of points of resonance with him. Like Lisa, Vance was an ex-lawyer; his independent income allowed him to volunteer his time to various groups, and his physical disability not only helped determine what kind of help he could (and

could not) offer, but seemed to bring him almost automatic sympathy from each of us for what must certainly have been a challenging change from his formerly able-bodied life. He talked about the various other groups to which he’d gifted his consulting services, and we felt privileged to be the apparent recipient of his next large donations of assistance. As far as I know, no one consulted any of the other organizations he said he’d helped; we took his word that he offered valuable services, and he spoke with both friendliness and authority as he diagnosed our “problems” and suggested solutions.

Patrick the Peak Oiler

Like Barry and Lisa, Patrick had moved to the community fairly recently, though apparently more on his wife’s initiative than his own. Whereas his wife seemed to thrive in the community environment and quickly made friends, he seemed to feel threatened by those same opportunities for connection. He felt unsafe in the group’s “well-being culture,” which emphasized vulnerability and self-disclosure among members, and he also feared his marriage was endangered by the other men his wife could now interact with. Before arriving in the group, he’d entered deep into the world of “Peak Oil” research and discussion, and now believed (and communicated this, in frequent emails) that no one else on site knew much about it or took it seriously—despite the fact that others were well aware of the issue and (unlike him) had moved on to practical, permacultural action in response. All this added up to a great deal of unhappiness, a feeling of being out of place in the community as it then existed, and an inclination to support almost any efforts to shake things up.

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All five of the above had reasons to want to see some kind of change, which increased the more they got involved in the group:

Barry felt he could contribute some of the skills gained in his previous career. Others saw him as someone who could step into a useful role as well—perhaps the kind of administrative/people-manage-

ment role that most in the group did not relish. As a result he transitioned quickly from someone trying to “learn the ropes” in the community, observing before acting (Permaculture principle #1), to someone who was being given reins before full assimilation. The other four in this group facilitated this process, advocating his hiring into a role roughly equivalent to executive director.

However, once in a position of greater influence and authority, Barry seemed to fall back on what he knew, what was familiar, what in some ways he’d built his occupational self-image around, the particular ways things worked in the bureaucracy that he’d come from. Instead of carrying around a mandolin everywhere, he now carried around a clipboard, easily giving the impression of supervisory surveillance. And despite having come through our membership process himself, a process he seemed to appreciate at the time, he now said that he’d identified a number of serious flaws (which he would detail and suggest alternatives to later) that merited suspending it until he could propose and we could pass a replacement.

While most of us didn’t know what “flaws” he was pointing to, suspending the process for a short time seemed a low-risk choice, simply because we were full up and could not accept any new people into residency anyway until we had openings. He said he’d bring a new process to us for approval within a couple months. It seemed safe to take him at his word. He had told us authoritatively that there were things that he knew, that we didn’t, and that we should trust his greater competency in this area to “make things right” that we’d gotten wrong. The internalizing of this message of our own inadequate knowledge and understanding may have helped lay the groundwork for what eventually unfolded.

Lisa too was seen as an asset due to her previous experience as a lawyer. None of us had studied law extensively, although the group had decades of experience navigating the complexities of nonprofit law, with the aid of outside experts and with some heroic episodes of self-education and research by previous members when particular issues arose. Before Lisa’s arrival, we were generally confident that all our t’s

were currently crossed and all our i’s dotted in relation to the relevant authorities—county, state, and federal agencies (including the IRS). The cofounder remembered extensive correspondence with the IRS about a particular issue that could have been confusing to any amateur, in which we received repeated reassurance that we were doing things correctly.

Lisa had no background in nonprofit law (just as Barry had no background in intentional community organization)—and yet law was one area in which she believed she had proficiency. Culturally, she can’t have felt herself an easy fit, having just come from close engagement with members of a political dynasty in Texas that was unpopular, to say the least, in our group. Yet she also seemed genuinely drawn to community, as did Barry. In fact, over time, she and Barry felt increasingly drawn to each other, eventually becoming a couple once she separated from her husband.

They shared something else in common too: Barry, despite “leaving the system,” seemed to attach some of his self-worth to the idea that what he had learned before and knew how to do was *not* fundamentally flawed or inappropriate for his new setting, but instead could be applied in our group just as well. Likewise, Lisa seemed still to be attached to her self-identity as an expert on law, despite having left the profession years before, and despite not actually having any particular familiarity with the areas of law that applied to our organization.

Our community’s culture included trying to be as supportive as possible to each unique individual who joined us, and indeed there was much about both Barry and Lisa to like. So Lisa’s insistence that she knew so much about law, and that we should trust her ideas about it, though we’d had faith in our own experience in it up to that point, seemed somewhat harmless to indulge, at least until we heard more, partly as a way of being supportive of her.

Edwin came from a somewhat different background too, though he had long ago taken the path of permaculture and community rather than a conventional corporate or professional career. He had not, however, entirely divorced himself from the messages of his upbringing (do any of us?)—and certainly not the influence of his parents. His father appeared to exert steady pressure on him to earn a salary commensurate with what similar work would garner in the “straight” world, rather than in a neo-hippie community in which the pay structure was egalitarian (with slightly higher wages for those with dependent children, and a small pay raise for each year a member stayed in the community). It was not clear that Edwin “needed” to earn more money than others to have material security—my impression was that his family was already a fallback guarantee of that. Perhaps he “needed” it, however, to keep the approval of his family.

It’s also possible that, independent of parental pressure, Edwin genuinely believed that differential pay was a superior system. In any case, Edwin did know that as long as



Photos by Nancy Roth



the whole community had a say in making decisions about such major issues, it might be impossible to adopt differential pay. Some, including the remaining cofounder, felt strongly, partly from a feminist perspective and partly from a communitarian perspective, that people deserved to be paid equally no matter what they were doing. They saw hierarchical pay structures as rewarding what were predominantly male-held “boss”-type positions with higher salaries; meanwhile, those who were providing all the support and “grunt” work to make those better-paid jobs possible earned lesser salaries—mirroring and reinforcing patriarchy and entrenched inequality, the opposite of what we were trying to achieve in the community.

Edwin found allies in both Barry and Lisa in challenging the community’s “flat-power,” egalitarian norms, and in suggesting that in organizational matters, the group should become more mainstream.

Vance, courted by Edwin to be a consultant, shared many of these same outlooks. Unfamiliar with intentional community life, and an “ex-lawyer in recovery,” he was nevertheless at an age where he evidently felt he should have things to teach rather than things to learn. He seemed to relish being regarded as an expert, and loved having an audience. He was quickly regarded as an ally by Barry, Lisa, and Edwin, who started inviting him both to speak with the larger group and, more frequently, to meet with the smaller set of people who wished to reorganize how the community and its nonprofit operated.

Patrick found hope for change—something he clearly wanted, given the multiple stressors affecting him—in the efforts of all four of the above. They advocated for conducting the community’s business in ways with which he was much more familiar and comfortable (despite the fact that this status quo had brought us to Peak Oil on a global scale). And his work in the office gave him avenues to help, as well as an influential voice in discussing these matters.

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Our community was structured as a nonprofit organization—or more precisely, the community was a project of the nonprofit that its founders formed. That nonprofit owned our land; had a well-defined, expansive mission, part of which was to host a residential intentional community there to explore, demonstrate, and educate about cooperative living skills and ecologically-informed practices; and had, by necessity, a board of directors, which held ultimate legal and fiscal responsibility for the organization.

The bylaws stated that all full members of the organization (individuals who’d passed their one-year community membership interview) were eligible to vote for the board

of directors. For nearly two decades, the community had elected the board from a slate of candidates presented at the annual membership meeting. Board members were therefore directly accountable to the community—they could be voted out at the next election and even recalled beforehand through community process. In actual fact we rarely, if ever, had more candidates than board positions available, because board members were recruited from willing individuals in the community and from supportive non-resident friends of the organization, and were generally asked to serve, rather than campaigning to serve. The board mainly supported the decisions and directions determined by our robust community processes; they functioned as a filter against potential decisions that could pose legal or excessive financial risks, but were not called upon to “steer the ship” or even do much to move it forward, other than attend occasional meetings. That ship was already being guided and propelled by all of us.

From the outset, the board was a legally essential organizational body that nevertheless found itself with few substantive decisions to make beyond approving what the community as a whole was already proposing to do. And the board almost invariably did so, because those decisions had already been pre-filtered through all the board members who were part of the community’s consensus process; the outside board members never found that there had been major oversights or flaws in what the community had decided it wanted to do. It was also comforting to know that there was a body composed partly of people with outside-of-the-community perspectives, who had ultimate oversight and could stop any overly perilous decisions (whether budgetarily or legally questionable) if the residential community ever made them. The fact that those board members knew they could be held personally liable in a court of law if they were negligent in their duties provided extra assurance that they would not take their role lightly, but would speak up if they saw anything amiss.

For years, this had been the arrangement—with the community being the main decision-making body, and the board providing review of and fairly reli-

able support for those decisions in their occasional meetings. The board took a leading role only when it was the most appropriate body to deal with an issue (examples included loan repayment negotiations and outside communications explicitly requesting board response).

And for all that time, they served at the behest of the community—one that, for all its diversity of viewpoints, always moved forward through consensus, with decisions designed to support the greatest common good and most effective fulfillment of mission. When we had a wide range of opinions and needs—for example, when some people wanted to host more outside groups and events than we were already doing (to boost group income and mission fulfillment in the larger world), and other members wanted to host fewer (to boost peace of mind and allow the smaller group to reconnect and recharge)—we always found a middle ground that acknowledged and took into account as much as possible every voice. While we might not each get our personal first choice in how things would go, we decided together, from a whole-group perspective. We all had buy-in in our decisions, and would work to make their outcomes as beneficial as possible, rather than trying to undermine them.

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The community had felt confidence in its ability to operate in this way. However, we now had on-site “experts” from the “real world”—as well as an off-site consultant—who found our ways unfamiliar and possibly even dangerous (at least to their sense that the understandings and practices they’d invested their lives in up until that point were “solutions,” rather than part of the problem). We also had at least one influential longer-term member who saw a shake-up in our modes of operating as a route to the specific change he was hoping for.

In a community meeting, Lisa said she’d discovered that we were out of legal compliance in a particular area and needed to change our practices—a change which would have had serious impacts on our group. I and a few others in the community who were familiar with this area disputed

this assertion, citing past communications with government agencies and advice we had received over many years from nonprofit lawyers, which we’d followed. I later provided documentation of our compliance over email, expecting this would resolve the matter.

The opposite happened: Lisa now asserted that this discussion (including the fact that it had made its way into email) posed a serious legal liability in itself, and that in fact most of us were unqualified to discuss legal matters at all. Barry, coming from an equally conventional background (and also increasingly close to Lisa personally), immediately took the same position. Both seemed to believe that the community needed to be protected from its sense that it actually knew what it was doing—meaning that no one other than lawyers (and those willing to accept whatever the lawyer in the room, in this case Lisa, said) should be given the opportunity to discuss anything related to the law.

Patrick also had a low opinion of the community and its supposed collective wisdom, Vance was happy to lend his voice in support of those (the other key players in this group) who had seemed most eager to listen to him, and Edwin seemed happy to see a potential consolidation of power that would make changes in the organization’s operations easier.

At our next community meeting, we were asked to consider the stunning proposal that our bylaws be changed to disallow the community to vote for the board of directors. Lisa and Barry insisted that we had shown ourselves not to have adequate background or knowledge to make such weighty decisions, and that allowing us to vote for the board presented an ongoing legal liability. They and Patrick threatened to quit their roles and leave the group if things remained the way they were. Edwin suggested he would leave as well. The proposed bylaws change was absolutely necessary for our organization’s well-being, they assured us. They’d had training, and knew how things worked in the real world; we didn’t. They were only trying to help us, and refusing their help would be shooting ourselves in the foot—in fact, it would spell doom for the group. Edwin especially, with his substantial accumulated social capital, had strong sway in weakening any resistance to this new plan, and several others in the same friend circle who’d felt rebellious against the community’s established ways came out in unambiguous support.

Meanwhile, those of us who favored collectivism and equal power were faced with a dilemma. Seemingly more prone to self-reflection and self-questioning than those advocating self-disenfranchisement, we were also more prone to make choices out of a desire to be supportive, even if it meant sacrificing some of what our guts told us was best. Perhaps our guts were wrong? Perhaps, despite all the communications we’d had in the past, including with true experts in nonprofit law, Lisa and Barry were right in their critiques of the ways we operated? Perhaps Vance really was helping us constructively, in pure ser-





vice, rather than as a way to meet his own needs for validation and purpose, regardless of real-world consequences? Perhaps Edwin's proposed shifts would lead to greater thriving for all, and for our programs? Maybe Patrick would be a lot happier in his life, transcend his tendencies toward jealousy and self-isolation, if we made this change?

One community member in particular spoke passionately in defense of the community's still-existing power to elect its own board of directors, and some others expressed quiet agreement. Most of the rest of us were more confused, many of us with a bad feeling about the whole thing but not absolutely sure that the proposed shift away from that would make a fatal difference for the group, and wanting to find some solution we could all agree on. We were also intimidated by the strong campaign for this proposal, which was presented as an ultimatum to prevent the exit of at least three group members, likely more, along with their families. Clearly, their side was not going to budge—if we were to arrive at a cooperative solution, it would need to be those with misgivings who yielded.

Ironically, we with misgivings actually had the power to stop the proposal—we operated by consensus. But for whatever reason, I and likely everyone else in my boat felt powerless to halt what seemed inevitable, the foregone conclusion that this was going to happen, that it needed to happen to prevent far worse outcomes. The experts were telling us so. We, the apparently ignorant, needed to listen. And unfortunately, we did. With several stand-asides but no blocks, the proposal to strip ourselves of voting rights for the board of directors passed. The board of directors would now be self-electing: starting with the next board election, only directors could elect themselves, or their own replacements, and they could not be recalled.

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Whereas the board had operated in the past as the final step in approval for already well-considered community decisions, even about most major matters, now the board had the power to make major decisions without worrying about community support for those decisions. Its concentrated, self-electing authority made it unaccountable to the larger group; it was able to steer our operations however it deemed fit. Barry, Lisa, Edwin, Vance, and Patrick, though not all on the board (they didn't all want to be), all had large voices in shaping its decisions, and dissenting voices were no longer included at all.

Whereas matters of import used to be discussed and decided upon in open, whole-community meetings, or in subgroups when decisions had been delegated there, now they were typically dealt with in much smaller gatherings around the "smoking shack," often in a haze of cigarette smoke. There, a few board members, along with staff members they'd hired who were aligned with them, seemed to arrive at most major decisions

without participation from others, to then be rubber-stamped by the wider board. Vance was a frequent attendee at these smoking-shack meetings, as were most of the "group of five." These gatherings were never announced, seemed to happen spontaneously according to the patterns of participants' nicotine addictions, and clearly did not invite participation from others—especially not those of us allergic to cigarette smoke.

The community still held its own meetings, at which it retained power to decide upon many matters related to daily community life: mealtimes, who would clean what space, personal guest hosting protocols, and the like. But its power to make decisions about larger issues, or even to elect people to represent it in deciding about those larger issues, had been stripped away.

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I will spare readers the sordid details of everything that unfolded over the two years following our decision to disenfranchise ourselves (this included corruption within the board itself; one board member appeared to trade free state-supplied medical marijuana to the bookkeeper for rent forgiveness, which the bookkeeper also extended to herself). However, I will offer some highlights:

Lisa and Barry both soon decided they'd had enough of community life and work despite getting everything they'd asked for from that member meeting. Lisa, it turned out, had been wrong in her legal assertions—we eventually received further confirmation that we'd been in legal compliance all along, and that she had convinced us to follow her advice as a non-expert in nonprofit law against the better (and, it turns out, accurate) judgment of many of us. Barry never did come up with the replacement membership-process proposal he'd promised, evidently not having as clear a vision or as much expertise as he'd asserted he had, and burning out on the more conventional, hierarchical operational model he'd helped institute (based on the same model he'd apparently already burned out on before, but couldn't let go of; it was all he knew). As a result, the community was

left “holding the bag,” with no membership process in place even once we started having openings, seriously hamstrung by the destruction of something that had been serving us well and was actually perfectly legal too. (Eventually, a mostly-new group of residents created a new version of the process, independently, that turned out to replicate the old in virtually every important aspect.)

Edwin burned out as well, despite having received the higher pay he was advocating for. He soon left what seemed increasingly like a sinking ship, having replaced himself with someone else who also soon left the role, despite its greater compensation rates.

Vance provided consultation until his abrupt exit when the discovery was made that the supposedly more business-like ways of operating he’d been encouraging had somehow led to operational protocols with disastrous blind spots, including the fact that we’d opened two, non-cross-referenced checking accounts drawing on the same limited pool of funds, and that we’d actually overdrawn our savings to a degree that could sink us financially within a matter of days without heroic intervention. Upon this discovery, the self-electing board got cold feet and said it was ready to “punt,” floating the idea of selling the land to pay off the debts resulting from this incompetence-masquerading-as-competence. Only a visionary proposal from a set of people determined not to let this happen stopped this land-sale idea from moving forward. (The proposal happened to be aligned with the more inclusive communitarian values that this group of five had worked against—but at this point the newly-humbled board was willing to try anything.) In the lead-up to this financial fiasco, the new business model—which involved much more hierarchy, including greater power invested in an executive director—also melted down, with staff morale plunging and widespread dysfunction brought about by this purportedly effective staffing structure, also created with Vance’s expert encouragement.

Patrick, for his part, convinced his wife to leave, along with him and their kids, even before the worst of the sh*t hit the proverbial fan. The changes he’d successfully advocated for did not, after all, make

everything better for him; and his wife, given the choice between a community in which she otherwise felt happy and a family that she felt the obligation and passion to hold together, chose the family, including her young children. Given what was to follow, this was certainly the best choice for her and that family’s happiness. Most of the community she’d gotten to know and love dispersed in the chaos that followed.

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Underneath all of this, what led to the unwarranted assertion of expertise on the part of that group of five (a precipitating factor in our group’s demise), and the unwarranted surrender of core values, common sense, intuition, and experience-based wisdom by everyone else (an even more important factor)?

It’s hard not to ascribe these failings to ego and insecurity—a fear of “not mattering,” a fear of “not belonging,” and fundamental self-doubt. This manifested, among those five, in exaggerated displays of confidence and certainty, actions taken partly because those individuals associated their self-worth with their existing knowledge and skill sets and familiar ways of being, which were threatened by the strange intentional community society they now found themselves part of. In the rest of us, it manifested in unnecessarily discounting what our own experience and guts were telling us, ceding power and authority to those who were claiming to know better than we did, and telling ourselves that assuaging the distress of this other group by going along with their proposal was a noble, compassionate, cooperatively-minded gesture, rather than a formula for the dissolution of our group and its democratic traditions.

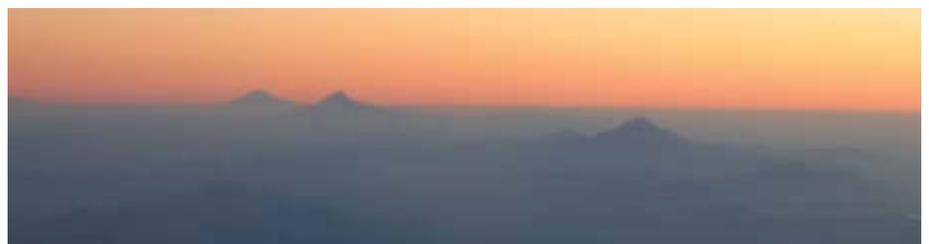
In retrospect, it seems the first set of people were insufficiently humble, and the rest of us were excessively humble. We wanted to belong, and if we didn’t go along with the loudest voices in the room, we might not belong—or else we might be confronting a substantial exodus and wondering “what if?": how might things have been better if we had agreed to their demands? If we didn’t agree, the worst might happen, and we’d have only ourselves to blame. It turned out that the worst *did* happen anyway, and we had only ourselves to blame, while all those people who’d been threatening to leave if the changes didn’t happen ultimately left even when they did.

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The story doesn’t end there, because this community and nonprofit finally did re-group, and, phoenix-like, over the course of many years, built back its democratic institutions, through the efforts of new arrivals and a few people who’d stuck it out or come back around. Community members once again elect their board of directors, the result of a board decision 10 years ago to reverse the bylaws change; it seems inconceivable to many currently involved that we ever allowed it to be any other way. I still struggle to understand it. But hopefully we are all more attuned both to the value of democratic empowerment (taken for granted at our peril), and to the warning signs of creeping oligarchy and dysfunction, along with the dangers poised by ego and insecurity, self-inflation and self-effacement alike.

We’re fortunate that we have the opportunity to say, “Never again.” May we continue to say it in the larger world as well. 🌸

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Hierarchical Response to Conflict at Heart—Culture Farm Community

By Kara Huntermoon

“Rowan is really scary. He dominates the household and makes it unsafe for me to relax,” complained Brenda, one of our farm work-traders. Brenda was visiting the farm for three weeks as a WWOOFer, a student worker with Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms. (WWOOFers work 25 hours per week in exchange for food, housing, and education in sustainable agricultural practices.)

“I’ll talk to him about it,” I replied.

What I really did, though, was listen to him about it. “What’s going on with Brenda?” I asked in a private conversation.

“She doesn’t clean up after herself, and no matter how gently I remind her, she acts like I’m abusing her,” Rowan said.

I asked Rowan several more questions, including: “What strategies have you used to address it with her?” “Does this situation remind you of anything from your past?” “How do other people seem to react to Brenda’s messes?” and, “What do you mean, she acts like you’re abusing her? What does she do and say?”

Rowan’s answers convinced me that he wasn’t doing everything perfectly, but he had good insight into his challenges. He was making an effort to try different strategies to find one that worked. While Brenda grated on his nerves for multiple reasons, he tried to be respectful of her. Her messes impacted everyone, not just Rowan. It seemed to me that Rowan was being responsible, humble, and focused on learning and effectiveness.

Our intentional community holds the WWOOFing program cooperatively. As the resident Permaculture instructor, I teach and lead WWOOF labor three to four mornings per week, create the schedule, and maintain an overview of the program. Three other residents rotate leading the farmwork one to two days each week. A fourth resident screens applicants and gives them information about our program, including orientation paperwork. Our community founder takes WWOOFers on nature outings during their down-time.

WWOOFers share a communal house with two residents. Those residents act as “Den Mothers” to orient WWOOFers to the community norms, maintain the shared space in reasonably clean condition, and teach them things like how to clean a cast iron pan and how to empty a humanure bucket toilet. They also tend to spend a lot of relaxed social time with WWOOFers outside of work hours. Rowan is a Den Mother.

The remaining residents support the WWOOFing program by sharing communal meals and tolerating the influx of new people who may stay as short as three weeks. For a community that focuses on building deep long-term relationships, the quick turnover of WWOOFers can be exhausting. Some residents choose to mainly avoid WWOOFers for this reason.

This dispersal of responsibilities is both a strategy for helping the WWOOFer program be sustainable for us, and a method of mentoring community leaders. Den Mothers and Day-Work Leaders can defer to me as the lead teacher if they need support. Sometimes they ask me for feedback or instruction. They get to discuss their mistakes and “lessons learned” in a low-stakes environment as they lead and manage groups of people.

Each week we have a WWOOFer meeting with the farm work-traders and residents who are actively involved in managing the program. At our next meeting, I was ready for Brenda’s complaints.

Not all hierarchies are based on domination. Some are grounded in rational recognition of differences, like differences of age, ability, responsibility, commitment, or knowledge.



Photos by Chris Roth

“How are things going in the house?” the facilitator asked. “Cleaning, social dynamics, etc.? Which issues need support to help you all have a good experience?”

“I’m having trouble with Rowan,” replied Brenda. “He’s bossing me around and acting scary.”

Our facilitator’s first response was to invite Brenda to elaborate: “What does he say when he’s bossing you around? What does he do when he’s acting scary? What do you think your role may be in this dynamic?”

Brenda’s answers were consistent with a kind of victimization culture that is common in the wider society. Namely, it located the “locus of control” and the source of her discomfort outside of herself, and proposed the solution would lie in the group forcing Rowan to change in order to make her feel safer.

In contrast, what we have found much more functional in our community is for people to locate the source of discomfort (and the “locus of control”) within ourselves for as long as possible. By turning towards personal growth and healing, we accept agency for our triggers, and work to be more responsible for helping things go well for ourselves and within our relationships. We don’t start by asking anyone else to change. We start by increasing our own skills and resilience.

Of course, sometimes the cause of a

problem is outside ourselves. When that happens, the personal healing we started with lays a groundwork for cooperative response to the outside threat. We are more likely to agree on the problem and on its solution when we can see that each person has done their best to responsibly address our own role in the dynamic.

In response to Brenda’s efforts to garner support for her grievances against Rowan, I pulled rank on her. Kindly, firmly, I told her that Rowan was the Den Mother for the house, and that he had every right to expect her (as a guest in his home) to respond to his efforts to keep the house clean. Further, I (the lead teacher and one of the landowners) completely supported him. I trusted that he was learning from any unskilled attempts at communication, and that any mistakes he was making were well within our capacity to allow him to keep trying things and growing without being perfect.

I thanked Brenda for her feedback, and assured her that both Rowan and the team as a whole would be considering it in detail and discussing it in order to help us learn. I also encouraged her to continue to communicate with us and told her (truthfully) that her feedback would help us create a better WWOOFer program. We want to be accessible and functional for as many students as possible.

I also gave Brenda a fuller picture of the functional hierarchy. I explained that the WWOOF program at Heart-Culture Farm Community operates by consent of the residents. That means Rowan (along with all other residents) has to agree that we have the personal, social, and economic resources available to support the initiative. If any resident decides that the WWOOF program is too costly for the community, we would have to re-evaluate its existence. It is essential that offering this educational opportunity to strangers works for every resident; it is not essential that Heart-Culture Farm works as a host site for every WWOOFer. Their mobility means they can leave if they need a different program than the one we operate here.

To calm the inflammatory accusations and respond to aggrieved feelings, I clarified for Brenda how the community hierarchy works. I invoked the leadership of hospitality: We will do everything we can to help you have a good experience (as a host would do for guests at a party), but as a guest, you don’t decide the rules in the house—the host/resident does that, with full support from the homeowner.

From our point of view, this went really well. Everyone in the room noticed that they can make mistakes and grow without being perfect, and their efforts will be supported. We affirmed our relationships and loyalty within the team. The short-term

Permaculture Classification of Errors

Permaculture has a three-tier classification of mistakes based on ecological impact.

Class 1 Errors are those we should never have made. If we thought about it beforehand, we would have realized they were bad ideas. They create ecological impacts that are widely damaging and impossible for one person to repair. Example: Concentrating hundreds of thousands of cows in very large buildings where the animals never go outside, and collecting their manure in lagoons that overflow into (and pollute) the surrounding ecosystem whenever it rains.

Class 2 Errors are those you wish you hadn't made because they are expensive to repair. Example: Building a septic system in a seasonal wetlands so it doesn't drain properly for half the year, and thus contaminates a small area (less than an acre). Ecologically, the impact is more easily remediable than a Class 1 Error. You can fix a Class 2 Error, but it's going to cost a lot (money, time, labor).

Class 3 Errors are the type you need to be making in order to learn. In today's current polycrisis, if we aren't making mistakes, we're not doing anything effective. We need to be trying all kinds of things that none of us knows how to do. In terms of farming, one thing that can be hard for people is that mistakes with livestock that lead to dead animals are classified as Class 3 Errors. Ecologically, they aren't a big deal. We are responsible for working our emotional muscles to develop the resilience to learn and keep going. It helps to keep in mind the bigger picture that small-scale perennial animal agriculture can be ecologically beneficial, even if some animals die while we are learning to do it well.

We can apply this classification system to intentional communities:

Class 1 Errors are those which cause the community to fail in its functioning. The land must be sold, assets dispersed, and people start over. These are mistakes the group cannot recover from and stay together.

Class 2 Errors are those with consequences the community has to live with for a long time. These include structural issues encoded in legal documents that are hard to change, or dynamics with the neighbors that impact the community's ability to meet its goals.

Class 3 Errors are mistakes people need to make in order to learn. Someone leaving the community due to conflict can be classified as a Class 3 Error, as long as those who stay are engaged in an active learning process in response. There is a need to exercise our emotional muscles and develop resilience in the face of social or economic difficulties. Putting Class 3 Errors into perspective can help us do that. It helps to keep in mind the bigger picture that intentional communities can have a beneficial ecological and social impact, even if some residents leave dissatisfied while we are learning to do it well.

—KH

guest moved on to other things within a week; the long-term residents deepened our trust for each other.

Many of us in politically left-leaning or progressive communities are “allergic” to hierarchy. This makes sense, given the hierarchies of domination that are so common in the wider world. However, not all hierarchies are based on domination. Some are grounded in rational recognition of differences, like differences of age, ability, responsibility, commitment, or knowledge. For example, adults are responsible for children, and ideally use their greater power to nurture them.

When we acknowledge rational hierarchies and link community decision-making to them, we can reduce structural conflict and help things go well in our homes. This works best when people in positions of power in the hierarchy are open to feedback, and when everyone understands their role as that of helping things go well in the group. With a leadership orientation of nurturing well-being in the community, and good group processes for assessing and learning from difficulties, mistakes should lead to improved functioning of the community over time. 🌱

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



Growing Leadership in the Next Generation

By Helen Gabel



Photos courtesy of Helen Gabel

I'm an elderly woman who has lived at Songaia, an intentional community outside Seattle, for 14 years. A few weeks ago I was coaching one of our 30-something members on entering shopping requests for one of our five weekly communal meals. She was envisioning a "scary Halloween" menu, and I was helping her figure out how many eggs to order and how to enter what she wanted on the shopper spreadsheet. Our goal was, first, to have fun, and second, to empower another young person to potentially take up the role of lead cook. In an intentional community with minimal formal leadership, one of our dilemmas is how to pass on sufficient skills and confidence to a new generation.

We are proud of how little hierarchy there is in our formal structures. All homeowners and many renters at Songaia are officially members of our Boards of Directors. (I say "Boards" in the plural because legally we are a hodgepodge of organizations.) In the eyes of the larger society, the officers of those Boards are our leaders.

But in reality our officers function mostly as the committee in charge of insurance policies and the annual budget. Our day-to-day leadership is invested in teams like the lead cooks, or other ongoing committees, or in individuals who take on a specific project. (See *COMMUNITIES* #199, pp. 27-29, for a discussion of Songaia's "passion principle.") How does leadership, new and old, emerge when no one is officially in charge?

Songaia has never had a spiritual leader or guru, but folks do listen more carefully when someone with gravity of presence speaks. More weight is given to those who articulate fairness, goodwill, respect for our living earth and one another. Long-time service, persistence, generosity, and lovingkindness are noticed and valued.

In Songaia's early years there were two especially charismatic members/leaders, Stan Crow and Fred Lanphear. They both had lived for many years in intentional community, both had professional experience organizing overseas, and both had that

kind of gravity of presence. Sharing responsibility was part of Songaia's founding culture. Both men actively mentored younger folks to take on leadership roles. Thus, when they both passed away within a few months of one another in 2009-2010, there was another generation ready to keep the community going.

Currently we have some situations where younger members are growing into leadership, and other situations which are more challenging. Economic realities have changed. Younger members have less time and less material security than the generation who founded Songaia more than 25 years ago. Consequently, today's young folk have generally been more reluctant to get involved.

Unsurprisingly, one area that younger members have naturally stepped forward in is tech support. They co-manage our email list and our wi-fi network, and they are key to our Zoom-hybrid community meetings.

They've also felt more room to spread their wings in creating new cultural events. For example, over several years they persuaded the established members to forego celebrating Thanksgiving as a community. Instead, they designed a September Harvest Festival and a late fall "Hunkering"—a settling into deeper community as the silence and dark of the winter surround us.

But, depending on the area, the opinions and initiative of those who have practical experience and technical expertise in that realm carry the most weight. That's made it harder to pass leadership from members of the boomer cohort, who may have spent an entire career as an engineer or a forester or a project manager, to those who are less experienced in management or mechanics or finances.

There are a few exceptions to the expertise barrier. The resident in charge of the septic system actively recruited two "apprentices" who have been willing to learn about this crucial part of our infrastructure. Personal outreach and the obvious critical need were key to their participation. The same factors motivated the person who is now a key member of the general coordinating committee.

There are some other common themes where we have been successful in inspiring new members to step forward. One sig-

nificant example is developing the role of the Garden Steward. First, even in our community culture, which until then had been all-volunteer, we found the funds to recompense the large time commitment needed by this role. Next, dedicated members of the landscape committee (the "Biogaians") worked daily alongside the new Steward, passing on the practical knowledge of many historical gardening seasons.

Over time, we gradually (perhaps too gradually) deferred more and more to her judgment and her decisions. For example, there was the year she and another young member independently designed and rebuilt our hoop houses. Now she is the beloved leader of a yearly cohort of permaculture interns, passing on her own wisdom.

A more recent example is the repainting of the pantry area of our barn. An individual long-serving member called together a task force to upgrade two dilapidated storage rooms. Two of the younger members were invited to take on the repainting project. A formal proposal was written to cover expenses, which included a stipend for the painting. Then the main decisions—of which paint, what colors, and what artistic elements to include—were left entirely to the discretion of the two painters. That autonomy and trust is a key part of empowering others.

Initially their choices bewildered some of us older members. However, as the full artistic vision emerges, we understand better what they are creating. And they have become more invested in the project. One of them took the initiative to hang new shelves and replace the old entry door with another that lets in natural light. She located, repainted, and, along with her partner, rehung the new door.

But Songaia still faces looming leadership gaps in physical maintenance, fiscal know-how, and organizational development. To be sure, many of those roles could be hired out to professionals. But we are working hard to keep our leadership diversified and participatory. So we will continue to inspire and mentor more individuals to step up to these roles in the future. 🌿

Helen Gabel is active in Songaia's landscape committee, the permaculture intern program, and the committee that coordinates general meetings.



Cooperatives Are the Next Revolution

By Alexis Zeigler



Farm review and planning meeting. A group of people dedicated to a greater purpose is largely self-organizing.



Nika running a solar direct drive lathe, learning how to build tools we need to support community self-sufficiency.

Photos courtesy of Alexis Zeigler

Our intentional communities movement, humble as it may seem at times, is enormously important. We have in our hands powerful solutions to the most vexing of modern environmental and social problems. Renewable energy works effectively in villages, not in suburban homes. Communities can take care of human needs more effectively than modern living patterns that leave people isolated.

Yet as much as our movement has to offer, we seem to perpetually struggle with organizational issues. If we can glean the lessons of a diverse set of organizations, we can build communities that balance personal freedom with effectiveness. The challenge is radically re-valuing what we have, and developing the communities movement into the vibrant and powerful agent of social change it is meant to be.

When I came to intentional community (Twin Oaks in Louisa, Virginia) at the age of 18, we told ourselves we were innovating with consensus. In the many years since then, I have worked with and helped start a good handful of activist and community organizations. Back when Reagan was toying with the idea of “winnable” nuclear war, I participated in some actions organized by Quakers. A very memorable moment occurred once when we were in an auditorium with a few hundred people, ostensibly to make some consensus decisions about an upcoming action. One fellow stood up and gave a short impassioned speech imploring us to do a particular thing. Then the next fellow stood up (yes, both men in this case) and gave an impassioned speech that we should do the opposite thing. “Here we go,” I thought. Then the first person stood up and said, “You know, you are right, I think we should do it your way.” Wow!

Many Quakers have a history of working together, of putting aside their egos for the sake of a higher cause. But the bottom line is that getting large eclectic groups of people to work together is not easy. I have seen dozens of well-intentioned groups, both activist organizations and intentional communities, torn asunder by badly managed “consensus.” The bottom line is that size matters a lot. Most small groups work just fine with informal consensus most of the time. That said, any organization needs to have a strong core. That core can be a set of strongly held values (like the Quakers aforementioned), or a strong personality or two. Catholic Worker households (radical Catholics who often house homeless people and engage in various forms of progressive activism) are always held together by a core family. The idea that larger groups of people can be held together purely by ideological commitment is nonsense.

We have learned that lesson the hard way at Living Energy Farm (LEF), where I currently live. We have a great small group of folks who work together very well at this point. My partner and I are founders, and have a strong influence on the operation of things. In our small community, we can support each other. Not so hard at this scale.

I have come to prefer a concept that we call “positive consensus.” With the often-misdirected version of consensus, one stubborn fool can bring the whole group to a halt. Positive consensus is based on the idea that we try to support each other, to hear each other out fully, to make changes as needed to accommodate people. Positive consensus seeks to employ the talents of all members of a group, focusing on the positive contribution and mutual support that is possible in a group rather than the



LEF's ducks do their part to curb the population of destructive insects. All decisions made by Quacksensus.

negative power to “block” decisions. With positive consensus, the mission of the group is more important than blocking. I have promoted that idea for a long time now. Ultimately, it comes down to the strength of the core.

We have had some hard times historically at LEF with decision-making. In those times, we let non-members have a strong voice. We had tortuous meetings in which we reduced the mission of the group to be subservient to personal angst. When a group gives over its decision-making process to personal angst, then the process fails. Talk is cheap, and intentional communities often attract people who are working with difficult issues (we are all crazy in our own way). The bottom line is you have to believe in your own mission strongly, or it will get taken away from you. If that offends some notions of “consensus,” so be it. I stand with the Quakers. If you are doing consensus, it has to serve a higher purpose, or else it will fail.

When we started LEF, we called ourselves, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, “Amish without the patriarchy.” We are not so Amish anymore in terms of our technology, though we have gotten to know some Amish folks who are interested in our Direct Drive DC Microgrid (D3M; check livingenergyfarm.org and livingenergylights.com for more information about that). I was raised in a very Christian family, similar to Amish in terms of religious commitment. My father was vehemently Christian, and also mentally ill, abusive, and deeply racist. It left me with a deep mistrust of traditional religious structures. But all of that left me with something else as well, that being a deep reverence for the order of the universe which we scarcely understand. Call that God or Goddess, the living world around us is a manifest miracle. I don't care whether you call it the product of four billion years of evolution, or give it the higher mind of Gaia. Either way, it is Sacred.

The 1960s were a time of upheaval in the US, and in other nations as well. There were similar upheavals in the 1890s, and before. Particularly in the 1960s, there was an extraordinary growth of powerful insights in the social sciences alongside high

aspirations for a better world. How were those movements defeated? There was certainly a measure of repression. Look up COINTELPRO or the assassination of Fred Hampton if you want more of that side of the story. But the real undoing of our progressive movements has been the ability of modern industrialism to turn our focus away from social concerns towards private possession and consumerism. Everybody (almost) gets their own private estate, however humble. The rapacious industrial system can feed us ice cream so we don't think about growing our own food. The corporate food system shortens your productive life by about 30 years (reference *The China Study*, by Colin Campbell, or *Healthy at 100*, by John Robbins). But the much deeper issue is dependency. The radicalism of the 1960s was commercialized, absorbed by the corporate and academic institutions. The symbols of radicalism were bought and sold, canned in reformist social programs, bottled up with academese.

Justice in a more equitable global economy has been the object of many progressive movements. Economic inequality can be presented in stark numbers. But the psychological impact of economic dependency is far more subtle. The bottom line is that whoever feeds you controls you. An interstellar anthropologist visiting planet Earth would not see the modern industrial nations as separate cultures. They are all organized along the same basic principles that allow a small handful of oligarchs—nominally capitalists, communists, or whatever—to control the productive forces, government, and military of each “nation.” The coalescing of power in our time is massive. As overwhelming as the concentration of power may seem, it is destroying itself. We need to create the cultures that can take its place. That is the work of our movement.

Whoever feeds you, controls you. What does that mean? It reaches to the deepest core of who we are as human beings, and we really prefer not to look there. Human culture evolves from the ground up. Ecological circumstance sets the stage for, and limits the scope of, economic activity. That economic structure in turn has a dominating impact over time on how we are organized socially, which strongly influences what we think and believe. When we study the broad scope of archaeology and history, these basic facts are undeniable. But these hard realities contradict the aspirations of all of our social leaders, regardless of their nominal political bent. Our leadership always focuses on talking about the impacts of their ideas and actions, not the products of working class sweat. The upper classes busy themselves with mental tasks, and the working class is left working with material things. Both our popular culture and our academic institutions are dominated by mentalism—the ideology that ideas, thoughts, and mental achievements drive the evolution of social change, not material work.

A basic understanding of human culture took a leap forward with a large school of Anthropologists writing in the 1960s and 1970s. For instance, a number of writers published books and articles that challenged the simplistic view that American women have historically lived in a uniform state of gender oppression. (See references from Alexis Zeigler, *Integrated Activism*, pp. 35-36.¹) The more complex reality is that women's roles in society have changed as their economic position changed. Did

you know that in some American colonies, women (of Euro descent) could vote, own property, and sit on juries? That they lost those rights as men moved into factory jobs and women were left at home? That those kinds of freedoms have been regained in the 20th century as women moved back into the labor force? That such patterns can be seen cross-culturally across the full spectrum of human societies?

A different book was brought to my attention recently: *The Dawn of Everything*, by David Graeber and David Wengrow. Apart from being an academic, David Graeber was a well-known contemporary activist, involved with numerous campaigns, including the Occupy movement. The book itself doesn't even mention the 1960s/70s anthropology schools that made so much progress in helping us understand ourselves. That book, along with the overwhelmingly dominant number of academics and "influencers" of our time, focuses on the evolution of ideas. Did you know that Karl Marx got a PhD in philosophy before he ever penned a word about working class struggle? He did not advance that struggle so much as give the educated class the mentalist means to take credit for it. Mentalism has become the water in which we fish swim—absolutely invisible. And yet that invisible water causes us to completely devalue what we have, what we can build with our own hands, what we can grow and create in our own communities. Mentalism says that the loud voices rule. It just isn't so.

The most insidious aspect of mentalism is that it causes us to grossly misunderstand the long-term evolution of power. Our social movements perpetually seek to win the great war of words. Our nominally progressive movements seek to help the disadvantaged climb the ladder of success while ignoring the fact that the ladder itself is collapsing. Our progressive news programs obsessively focus on personalities, villains and heroes. The political meltdown of our time is unnerving. It is also predictable. For anyone who has studied the empires of our heritage, they too rejected science in favor of a more comforting mysticism as they went into decline. Political oscillation under these circumstances is both predictable and brutal. It is also obvious that if and when our favorite villains fall, they will be replaced by new spokespersons of the billionaires who will sacrifice democracy and all of God's creation to avoid paying taxes.

I have built shacks out of trash that have thick walls made of crumpled newspaper, leaves, bamboo, straw, and other kinds of detritus. These shacks are passive solar design, are all but free to build, and will go through a winter in a temperate climate with little auxiliary heat. Strawbale and passive solar are nothing new. They were building with strawbales in Germany 500 years ago, in the US over a hundred years ago. Working class people all over the US sacrifice their well-being to live in corporate manufactured trailers instead of more sustainable shacks. The shacks we can build ourselves, the food we can

grow, these are the Goddess we can look in the eye. Driven by mentalist misunderstandings—that powerful and purposeful drive to perpetually value the output of the ice-cream economy owned and controlled by the oligarchs—we perpetually undervalue what we have in our hands, what we can build and grow ourselves.

I built a cooperative house in Charlottesville years ago, Woodfolk House. (It is strawbale, with both passive and active solar heat, and runs at less than 10 percent per capita energy use compared to average American residential energy use.) I wanted to plant a garden and an orchard in the yard. I was dismayed by the prevalence of wire grass. That plant is powerful, aggressive, a formidable foe of gardeners. How on Earth was I going to dig up a half acre of it? That was 25 years ago. I never dug it up. I just proceeded. As time progressed, the orchard grew. The small trees struggled against the choking wire grass. But as the trees grew, the wire grass receded. It needs the blazing heat of clearly cut land to thrive. In the shade of the fruit trees, it melts away over time. The parable of the wire grass tells the story of where the communities movement stands. Fight for your rights, defend yourself when you need to. Those are good and necessary things. But if you plant, if you look to the long vision, we will win. 🌱

Alexis Zeigler was raised on a small farm in rural Georgia. He is an activist, author, and builder of renewable energy systems. With a great deal of help, he founded Living Energy Farm, an off-grid community that is largely food and income self-sufficient. LEF has pioneered a Direct Drive DC Microgrid that makes grid power obsolete, and is much cheaper and more durable than conventional solar. LEF is spreading its conservationist design to communities in the US and abroad.



Harvesting persimmons in the second week of December—a super-sweet part of food self-sufficiency.

1. Women lost the right to vote in New Jersey in the early 1800s. Johnston, Carolyn, *Sexual Power: Feminism and the Family in America*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1992, p. 14. O'Kelly, Charlotte G., Carney, Larry S., *Women and Men in Society: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Gender Stratification*, Wadsworth Publishing Co., CA, 1986, p. 126. Gordon, Michael (ed.), *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1978, pp. 363-372. Haller, John S., and Haller, Robin M., *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1974, p. 94.

Profit, Power, and the Collaborative Home

By Daway Chou-Ren



The author holding a workshop on race, shame, resentment, and pride.



Two community members performing at a Chinese cultural heritage celebration in our event space. In addition to cultural events, the space is mostly dedicated to relational, emotional, and healing workshops.

The Enticing Model

When I sat down for dinner with my friend Nathan, his idea for how communities could rent and eventually buy homes, keeping money circulating within the group, lit me up. Communities generate relational, creative, and cultural value, yet—at least for renting communities—most of their finances flow to an outside landlord.

At the community where Nathan and I met and became good friends, former residents had transformed their very large, barren basement, using their own money, into a vibrant gathering and event space with dozens of events a month. It became a beloved third space. In swooped the landlord. Seeing the property's increased value, he raised the community's rent.

Nathan wanted to remove the landlord from his next community, and he had found an interesting opening. Where we live there are all these oversized homes. He came across an unwieldy 18-bedroom house. Who better to rent such a place than a community? Who better to eventually buy it? He negotiated a favorable two-year lease with first rights to purchase after that. I found the possible future compelling: what if we could live together, build real bonds, and let our commitment grow slowly? We could rent first, and co-own later. No cold feet from jumping too fast into a group purchase.

Nathan would be the master tenant. He was taking on real risk and leadership: signing a lease without knowing whether the house would fill, negotiating terms and renovations with the landlord, and carrying a compelling vision for a community that aimed to make meaningful cultural change in our town. His vision of crafting culture and sharing it is what drew all of us together. He planned to make the top floor a paid workshop space, a place where the relational work we practiced and refined at

home could be shared more widely. For all of this risk, vision, and labor, he planned to charge the community rent above his own costs and take a share of the workshop revenue.

I had some concerns. Is community something to profit from? But I felt it was better for communities to exist, with founders compensated for the work of making them possible, than to not exist at all because no one can afford to take on that labor for free.

Can profit be part of communities in ways that strengthen and help spread them, rather than something that destroys them? I'm writing from inside this experiment, as we run into painful, unresolved tensions. And I write as someone who lived with Nathan in a previous community with a similar landlord–master tenant–subtenant structure, one that ended in lawsuits, deteriorated relationships, and a messy dissolution. We both knew things had to be different. This piece is about how hard that shift has proven to be.

Secrecy

If money is the root of all evil, secrecy is the shadow that feeds it.

At our former community, we also had a master tenant. He worked tirelessly to run the gathering space. He was the reason it continued to exist, and all of us residents benefited from it. In private, he charged the community surplus rent to create a buffer fund. When I eventually learned of this, I thought it was wise: someone has to cover the shortfall when a housemate leaves so there's no time pressure to fill their space. He also took a free room. Given how much he did for the gathering and event space, I personally had no issues with this level of compensation after I found out.

But he didn't tell anyone. When these secrets came out, residents were furious. Without transparency, there was no chance for subtenants to consent to their higher rent. With this sense that everyone was just taking for themselves, the relationships between the

residents, the master tenant, and the landlord fell apart.

When trust breaks, people often justify their own retaliatory behavior. A legally minded resident stopped paying rent and eventually sued the landlord; she was paid tens of thousands to leave. The landlord finally decided he was done with the headache of dealing with a 20-person community. He bought everyone else out, ended the community's lease, and closed the beloved public gathering space.

The Pain of Talking about Money

So when Nathan told me he intended to take a monthly profit from this new community, my alarm bells went off. He had internalized the lesson to be upfront that he was charging surplus rent, but as he talked, he still wasn't telling me how much. My partner and I told him we wouldn't move in until he agreed to share the actual numbers with the house because any vagueness would create the shadow for rumor to take root. I did not want to be a part of a house with easy places for resentment to build.

Nathan understood. He also froze. He named aloud that he didn't feel safe revealing the details to everyone. Money is a ripe target for projection. Being at the center of profit invites other people to land their fears and stories on you.

Eventually he agreed. He called the community and held an open meeting to walk us through the books. The numbers were only partially there: the house wasn't full yet and the event space wasn't really running, but the projected surplus was thousands per month.

Months later, with all rooms filled, several housemates asked for a second transparency meeting. Nathan presented the same projections—still no updated numbers. People were upset there was no clarity. Nathan was not inclined to provide more details. People shouted. Eventually, everyone let the matter drop, but the consequences of that opacity still linger.

I long for the day when *communitarian* can be a proudly worn job title and not just a passion hobby. When people can profit

from the hard work of leading a group and taking a risk in starting something, and have that be acceptable. When communities have healed enough of their wounds around money that we can talk about it freely.

For now, the opacity around the level of profit in our home creates a steep power imbalance. It signals "I don't trust you" and crushes collaboration before it can form.

I recently facilitated an all-house meeting where we all gave Nathan our feedback on this. Everyone there voiced a concern about the financial and power structures of our community. One housemate said to Nathan bluntly: "You're a landlord." We, it seems, have gone just about full circle. For most of us, the profit Nathan is taking is not a problem, but the opacity and magnitude of it is.

The Consequences

It's become clear that the economics we're operating under are those of a business, not a co-op or community. That might even be workable except Nathan's not the only one creating value, not by a long shot, so the equation is out of balance. Something fundamental is off. We're a house full of cultural creatives—artists, facilitators, technologists, and healers—and yet, we're not creating together. People are launching individual events and projects aligned with our community's mission, but not communal ones.

Systems balance themselves out. Our house could come back into balance if he split the profit with the others doing the heavy lifting of bringing his vision into the world. But he won't. So the system balances itself in another way: the communal initiative and value others create begins to recede.

The shape of our community—collapsing to a single point with Nathan at the top—isn't working, not just for us, but also for him. "It's lonely at the top," the saying goes. It's also exhausting. Nathan can't step back or falter. The structure doesn't let him. If he isn't holding the whole community all the time, how does he justify his income?



A proud communal gardening achievement—growing sidewalk corn in the city!



A house ritual dinner before we played with our Darketypes (www.lightdarkinstitute.com) that prevent us from tackling the age-old communal problem: how to always wash our dishes.

Photos courtesy of Daway Chou-Ren



Hand-painted artwork lovingly contributed to our event space by an early community member.



Artwork laser cut by community member Gabriel Schama (www.gabrielschama.com) to decorate our community events space.

There's another consequence to failing to distribute ownership. It's not just that those unwoven into the community stop contributing. Worse, when conflict comes, they might not hesitate to tear it apart.

Recently, two housemates who had been in a long conflict with Nathan moved out. Their complaints ranged from critiques about the wisdom of his decisions, to his opaqueness about the financials, to feeling like he was shutting their voices down and not letting them contribute. Their unintegrated gifts hardened into resentment and then into open hostility. They were so outwardly resentful and on edge in their final days that our housemates on their floor temporarily moved out until they left.

The intensity of this fracture, and I think the fracture itself, existed partly because our financial model never created a shared sense of "we're building this together." Just as disenfranchised citizens won't hesitate to disrupt social contracts; disenfranchised community members will often try to burn down the house.

A Way Forward

I still haven't ruled out the wisdom of experimenting with a for-profit community. I'd like founders to be compensated for their risk-taking, for bringing something into the world that wouldn't otherwise exist. But I've realized that any for-profit community needs much more than financial transparency. Maybe the founder's profit taken needs to taper off as others step up and the founder holds less and less. But if profit remains, any healthy community needs a clear path for distributing its sense of ownership, and in this case, that means a path for distributing profit over time.

Not necessarily in equal proportions. Even the egalitarian income-sharing communities that I've visited still elect certain members to hold greater responsibility. In our community, some contribute more, some contribute less, and some are here just to soak it in and receive. I think distributed ownership can reflect that.

What I do know is that those who build community—who set the vision, who fine-tune the systems, who mediate conflicts so people can continue to live together, who bring the *je ne sais quoi* that others find enlivening—are creating something valuable. My first exposure to this was when I moved during college to a new city for a summer internship. I saw an "intentional community"

ad on Craigslist with no clue what I was walking into and found a house bursting with connection, love, and aliveness. I remember thinking "*Adult life can be like this?*" My dread about graduating the next year evaporated. That internship has faded from memory; that summer in community hasn't. It changed me and taught me more about myself than any job I've had since.

The summer before, I paid \$5000 to join a Mandarin immersion program in Beijing. Looking back, would I have paid that or more for the relational immersion I received in that house? Absolutely.

There is a vision here: of a community that brings in money for the cultural and relational experiences it offers to guests and non-core residents who sense a different way of living is possible. Our community, through the workshops we lead, has already helped many people grow into more love, aliveness, and well-being. And there are many other ways a place like this can generate value. There *is* a path for both founders and core stewards to be compensated, for them all to collaborate in growing the value that the community creates.

I don't know if our community can shift to a model where the monetary value flows back in some proportion to those who do the most to steward our culture, where releasing financial control actually opens the door to more inventive creation. Systems are hard to change. Money is even harder. It's difficult to talk about, harder still to loosen one's grip on. And maybe introducing profit just inevitably corrupts what makes a community wonderful, no matter how good your system is for distributing it.

But the new vision still compels me enough to explore it: a home that creates value and isn't afraid to receive it in return. A home where the value we generate is held by the community and for the community. One where there's no landlord, whether on the lease or in practice. 🌸

Daway is a community builder and facilitator who specializes in helping groups and individuals navigate the psychological, emotional, and structural blocks that limit them. His work centers on creating spaces where people can dive into or discover their avoided issues that are blocking their creative and relational potential. See www.dawaychouren.com.

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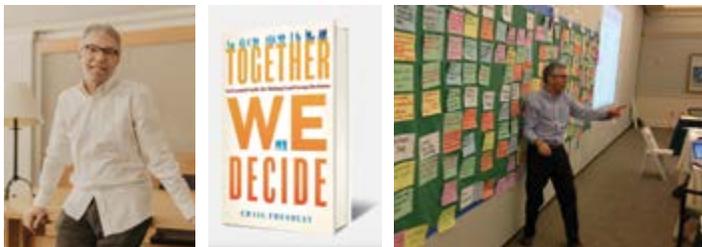


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The Larger Significance of Small Communities

By James L. Payne

When it comes to what makes news, intentional communities lie rather far outside the limelight. These small groups of a dozen to several hundred people—communes, ecovillages, cohousing organizations—go almost unnoticed in the daily swirl of headlines trumpeting the dramas of the political world.

Thoughtful analysis indicates, however, that this lack of attention is far from warranted. An examination of the broad sweep of history suggests that these humble flowers are profoundly significant. Indeed, one could say that they represent the wave of the future!

Let's take a look at how the political institutions that dominate our world began. Thousands of years ago, the emergence of written language enabled humans to move from a primitive, tribal existence into more structured, organized forms. Alas, our species wasn't very thoughtful about this process, and we found ourselves embracing three dysfunctional ideas:

1. Emphasizing the use of force;
2. Valuing units of extremely large size;
3. Trusting in the presumed wisdom of distant authority.

The appeal of these themes led to the large, force-based units that today dominate the world: governments.

At first glance, this pattern of human organization seems fixed, something we can't do anything about. This view is understandable. Today, governments are deeply woven into our lives; they are not going to be set aside in any quick or easy fashion.

But if we take a longer view, there is reason to predict that we will evolve to a healthier model. We can say this because *there is a clear historical trend away from the values that shaped modern human organization—force, size, and trust in distant authority*. In other words, even though leaders can't bring themselves to declare that these ideas are dysfunctional, at a deep cultural level we have increasingly realized that they are unsound.

Swords and Guns

It is quite surprising, even shocking, to see how enthusiastically early civilizations embraced the use of force: killing people because you feared them or hated them, killing them because they stood in the way of your goals, or killing them just for fun. This early orientation led to political units that were based on force. The presumption was that goals and ideals, rules and regulations—and funding—should be upheld by force. If you didn't wear the right clothes or worship the right god, or give your money to Caesar, you were punished by the sword.

Over the ages, people in structured societies have—in a mostly unconscious way—been moving away from this emphasis on force. One of the early signs of this trend was the shift against the custom of human sacrifice. In early times, organized cultures followed the practice of slaying innocent human beings as an act of worship. It was assumed that gods, having the human values of the time, got positive satisfaction from seeing humans—perfectly innocent humans, including children—slayed in vicious acts of violence.

Around 2-3,000 years ago, opinion began turning against human sacrifice. The Hebrews moved away from this custom around 600 BCE, as reflected in the tale about

A few dictators and would-be dictators still want to incorporate neighboring jurisdictions, but most grownups have outgrown the appeal of ever-larger political entities.

Abraham, who was intending to sacrifice his son Isaac until God told him not to. Rome passed a law against human sacrifice in 97 BCE; Japan moved beyond the custom at about the same time. Some organized societies—the Aztecs of Mexico, the Khonds of India—were still practicing the custom in more recent times until colonial powers ended it.

Another sign of the turning away from violence is the decline in capital punishment. In earlier times, slaying humans for apparent wrongdoing was a widespread practice, one enthusiastically endorsed by a public which apparently got great pleasure from watching grisly spectacles of execution. And the crimes punished included trivial wrongs. In early Athens, stealing cabbage was punishable by death. As late as 1820, England had 222 capital offenses in its legal code, including robbing a rabbit warren and cutting down a tree. Indeed, the idea of letting wrongdoers live—through the invention of the prison—is a rather modern development. The first house of correction in Holland was established in 1588, following a jury's refusal to vote the death sentence for a 16-year-old boy accused of theft. Today, a clear majority of countries of the world—72 percent—have moved away from using the death penalty, and those that still have it, such as the United States, resort to it much less frequently than before.

Is Bigger Better? The Lure of Empire

The second principle that has been driving human organization is the appeal of being part of an ever-larger entity.

As a child at age seven, when I was first learning to read maps, I was browsing through the atlas and noticed that England and its colonies were all in red. The US possessions, including Alaska and the Philippines, were in green. Then I saw that Mexico, adjacent to the US, was colored yellow. How neat it would be, I thought, for my country to take over Mexico so it could be colored green.

The desire to make one's group into a larger, more important entity is, as this embarrassing recollection illustrates, a primitive human impulse. For millennia it has driven rulers to expand their

jurisdictions, aiming to incorporate more lands and people under the control of a single government. The result was endless wars of expansion and ever-growing countries and empires. For the longest time, almost no one questioned this pattern of expansion. Even though the costs were huge—soldiers and civilians killed, wealth squandered—people admired the leaders who did it. To cite one example, the Greek ruler who marched his armies across Persia to India, slaying and being slayed, is called Alexander the Great.

Finally, in the 19th century, a few activists and scholars began to question the logic of imperialism. Among other things, they noted the virtues of free trade. If you wanted tea from Burma, they pointed out, it was cheaper simply to buy it than to send an army to seize the whole country. The logic of expansion began to be questioned, but it took time for the arguments to affect policy. Even as late as the 1890s, an American senator was declaring, of Cuba, that “we certainly ought to have the island to round out our possessions.” The result of this urge to grow was the Spanish-American War of 1898, and the US occupation of Cuba (for four years), Puerto Rico, and the Philippines.

In the 20th century, after two World Wars, opinion finally shifted against empire. England, France, Belgium, and Holland shed their colonies. The US gave up the Philippines. The demise of communism led to the breakup of the Soviet empire. A few dictators and would-be dictators still want to incorporate neighboring jurisdictions, but most grownups have outgrown the appeal of ever-larger political entities.

Faith in Distant Authority

The third unhealthy impulse that has shaped human organization is the disposition to ascribe wisdom to prestigious individuals and entities. If a person is esteemed by others—a medicine man, a priest—his commands and exhortations are taken seriously, even when there is no scientific basis for them. When large groups are involved—tribes, nations—this tendency to trust authority is multiplied, as Gustave Le Bon detailed in his study of crowd psychology. An impulse of collective confidence leads humans to respect, even worship, governments and those in charge of governments: emperors, presidents, and senators.

The problem with this faith in distant authority is that it overlooks the complexity of human organization. Running a farm or a mill is a difficult task, involving many complicated decisions. The same is true of trying to teach children or working to heal



James L. Payne



the sick. The idea that a far-away ruler without knowledge of specific details could wisely dictate constructive behavior in millions of distant situations is implausible.

Yet for thousands of years, this implausible assumption has dominated. The human race begins its involvement with government in a state of awe. Rulers are seen to be gods, or agents of God. This spirit of worship was reflected in putting rulers in stately marble palaces.

In earlier times, this faith in distant authority was facilitated by two supporting conditions. One was the repression of critics. All leaders will have detractors, and if they are allowed to repeat their criticisms and gather followers, then the rulers' aura of godly wisdom will start to fade. In the past, this has been dealt with by violence: critics were arrested and executed. This silenced them—and deterred other potential critics from opening their mouths. Violent repression was directed against not just outright critics of rulers but at almost any doubting of the prevailing system. Socrates' philosophical explorations got him slain for questioning the gods of Athens. In Rome, a courtier was executed for failing to praise an emperor's poetry.

The move away from violent repression has been surprisingly recent. Although a few ancient commentators recommended allowing freedom of expression, in practice, all regimes fiercely and brutally repressed critics. The turning point—in the more advanced cultures—came in the 18th century with key decisions allowing freedom of speech and freedom of the press. In the American colonies, one of these decisions was the Zenger case which, in 1735, established the right of journalists to print criticisms of rulers. Of course, human progress is never uniform, and so, even today, some countries—Russia, China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea among them—still follow the traditional pattern of using force to punish critics of the government.

Allowing criticism begins to lower the awe of government, but to be really effective, this criticism needs to be spread widely. This brings us to the second factor in the new pattern of distrust: technology. In the 18th century, if there were any words of disapproval they were carried in ponderous books and gazettes available only to affluent readers. This started to change in the 19th century with the arrival of the rotary press, which dropped the price of newspapers, and the development of the telegraph, which greatly sped up the transmission of news. The 20th century has seen an explosion of communication, with radio, television, and the internet.

The combination of the freedom to criticize and the growth of the technology

that transmits this criticism has brought about an historic plunge in the faith in government in just our lifetimes. One indicator of this change is the decline in public confidence as shown by opinion polls. Perhaps the longest-running survey question, dating back to 1958, is the Pew Research Center's survey that asks respondents whether they "trust the government in Washington to do the right thing." The proportion answering "almost always" and "most of the time" has fallen from around 75 percent in the late 1950s to around 20 percent since 2010.

The modern loss of faith in government also shows up in the realm of political fiction. In earlier times, writers looked to government to create a utopia. Plato was perhaps the first to propose this model, an ideal state in the hands of all-wise philosopher-kings who dictated the right policies. More recently, Karl Marx and leaders of socialist and communist parties expected that once government was put in the right hands—theirs—utopia would follow. The American writer Edward Bellamy, who published his time-travel novel *Looking Backward* in 1888, postulated a government-run American utopia in the year 2000 where "No man any more has any care for the morrow" because "the nation guarantees the nurture, education, and comfortable maintenance of every citizen from the cradle to the grave." When it appeared 137 years ago, this book assuming perfectly wise and ethical government supervision was not laughed at. It became a huge bestseller, and inspired the formation of scores of "Bellamy Clubs" that hoped to turn this dream into reality.

In more recent times, as the public grew wiser, big-government utopias lost their appeal. The best-selling books of political fiction were the works that suggested big government brings about the opposite of utopia: dystopia. These include *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley, *1984* (1948) by George Orwell, and many others since.

A New Path to Utopia: Active Neighbors

In the light of these trends, what is the path toward a better world? The first part of the answer to this question would

seem obvious: the human race needs to continue its movement away from the unhealthy themes of force, large size, and faith in distant authority. Intentional communities embody this recommendation. They are small, voluntary, and collectively managed. Thus, we can say they are on the right track.

Avoiding bad ideas is only half of the job of creating a better world, however. There also needs to be a positive vision, an ideal to be put into action.

When you visit a community, you soon notice this ideal. A community doesn't run itself. It takes caring, thoughtful individuals who step forward to solve the problems of those around them. They fill out purchase orders, motivate helpers, keep records. And they develop strategies for smoothing the misunderstandings and personal frictions that can split people apart. You see a thriving vegetable garden, or a newly-constructed toolshed, or families enjoying a supper together. When you inquire into what is behind this achievement, you learn about all the personal energy, creativity, and caring that lies behind it.

This theme of personal helpfulness is an ancient idea. Several thousand years ago, at a time when civilizations were engrossed in the violence of empire and focusing attention on high religious and political authorities, an itinerant teacher in an unnoticed corner was spreading a different perspective on how we should live. One of his central themes was portrayed in a widely-known parable, a story about what happened to an injured traveler on the road to Damascus. Authority and bureaucracy were informed about his misfortune, but they ignored it. Stepping forward was an individual who extended thoughtful assistance. The good Samaritan was the true neighbor. We can find analogous stories in other wisdom traditions as well.

That would seem to be the direction for a healthier, more creative future for the human race: turning ourselves into neighbors. Here, we must note, we are using the word "neighbor" in the old-fashioned sense. Today, technology—automobiles, TV, internet—have isolated us, and "neighbor" has a rather empty connotation, referring simply to some-

one living nearby—across the street, down the hall—a person you hardly know and have little contact with.

The neighbor of the parable—and the neighbor of the intentional communities that offer a promising future—is one who is in full contact with those around, who thoughtfully participates in helping them meet their needs. This person is an "active neighbor," one who engages us and carries out helping tasks unobtrusively.

This brings us to another clarification: an active neighbor is not the same as a leader. Our experience with politics and large organizations makes us likely to assume that human groups more or less automatically must have leaders, that is, outstanding figures who make the important decisions. Well, this tends not to be so in communities—at least not in successful communities. Nobody's name is over the gate or at the bottom of all documents. Decisions are made organically, through the ebb and flow of many neighbors consulting each other's opinions and expectations.

The virtue of this subtle, indirect pattern of organization is evidenced by the break-up of communities led by a dominant personality. A group centered on an authority figure may look impressive at first, but in the long run this leads to conflicts and resentments that result in dissolution.

Moving Forward

What does the future look like? Obviously, the world has a way to go before it fully overcomes the unhealthy impulses on which political organization was originally based. There are years of confusion ahead, and it will take much patience to work past all the tensions and misunderstandings. But at least we know the direction in which we should head.

In their quiet, patient way, intentional communities energized by active neighbors express the healthy principles we need for a better life. 🌱

Dr. Payne has taught political science at Yale, Wesleyan, Johns Hopkins, and Texas A&M University. His books include Why Nations Arm (1989), The Culture of Spending (1993), Overcoming Welfare (1998), and A History of Force (2004). Recently, he has visited a number of intentional communities, including a one-week participation in the Bruderhof community in Rifton, New York.



Cooperative Identity At Stake: How do we develop communities of compassion, care, and love?

By Thomas Mengel

We had a blast driving across the rocky Island of Newfoundland, Canada. We were on our way to Corner Brook to attend the 2025 Convention and Annual General Meeting of the Newfoundland Federation of Co-operatives (NLFC), September 26-27, 2025.¹ Jimmy, Ken, and I enjoyed each other's company and we shared a deep love for our cooperatives. We were confident in contributing meaningfully to the cooperative movement, and we were hopeful for overcoming the setbacks we experienced in our own cooperatives.

In early 2025 I wrote about the development of the Killick Coast North Seniors Co-operative, a community helping seniors "age well at home."² Yet our cooperative's growth has since stagnated. We have already invested in values-oriented community-building through common meals, a strategy meeting for all members, and educational material highlighting the community values of the cooperative. Inspired by the global Charter For Compassion³ and the provincial Relationships First Newfoundland Restorative Justice⁴ movement, we have placed the values of compassion, care, and putting relationships first at the core of our educational material.

Currently, we are planning another vision-and-strategy meeting early in 2026. Some of us volunteer for external organizations offering compassionate care for aging people with declining health and supporting the building of compassionate communities.⁵ In addition, I believe implementing a pastoral care volunteer position would help expand the existing friendly visit service. Pastoral care can support seniors in navigating challenging transitions and in exploring meaningful life choices. This initiative might also help fostering deeper conversations between members of various religious and non-religious backgrounds.

Another co-op, the Sunrise Funeral Co-operative,⁶ incorporated on June 21, 2024, follows the model already established in other Canadian provinces and internationally. I am a founding member and have been elected as Director-at-large of the board for 2024-2027.

Membership in the cooperative has grown significantly since incorporation, mainly

Love will not prevent conflict, but it will offer ways of peaceful and compassionate solutions, and it will allow cooperative communities to develop a strong and sustainable identity.



through offering a substantial discount for funeral services. However, member engagement is very limited. The night before our journey to Corner Brook, we had to adjourn the AGM without conducting any business due to the lack of quorum. We currently are exploring options to address this challenge through a focus on community development based on solidarity, compassion, and care.

We know our cooperatives are not alone in addressing this challenge. For the seventh consecutive year, a survey of Canadian cooperative leaders found that the lack of awareness of the cooperative model continues to be the most pressing and important challenge facing the cooperative sector.⁷

Co-operative Identity Development

During the convention in Corner Brook, we conducted a panel addressing the issue of cooperative identity. We concluded that we needed to provide cooperative education and make cooperative values like care and compassion the hallmark of our communities. One member of the audience interestingly suggested that while cooperatives are not religious organizations we could learn from faith communities how to develop a sense of belonging.

The harm and hurt resulting from the experiences of abuse and violence accompanying religious movements notwithstanding, the concepts of love, compassion, and care are central to communities within various religious and non-religious perspectives.

These concepts may be the only way to overcome traumata resulting from and tensions between belief systems and build compassionate communities that we want to be part of.

About the early *Christian* communities, the Roman historian Tertullian wrote: “See how they love one another.”⁸ Charity is described as loving and acting service to community members and to outsiders in need.

In *Buddhism*, the concept of loving-kindness is central, cultivated through meditation and compassion aiming at alleviating suffering of self and all beings.

Hinduism encompasses various forms of selfless love and devotion, expanding one’s concern beyond the self to see dignity in all beings and encouraging an altruistic approach.

In *Islam*, compassion and caring for the needy, charitable giving, and general kindness are key attributes of our being and doing.

In *Judaism*, enduring love is a key concept, a principle of action, and a moral obligation to build a just society. Acts of loving-kindness are expressions of faith and include providing for the vulnerable, welcoming guests, and giving charity.

For *First Nations, Metis, Inuit*, and other *indigenous worldviews*, interconnection is at the core. The phrase “All my relations” reinforces that everything in the universe is connected and is worthy of respect and caring.

Secular Humanism emphasizes the centrality of love, compassion, and concern for all beings; the dignity of every human being; and the pursuit of individual and communal well-being and happiness. These foundations of the humanist life stance are derived from a naturalistic and evidence-based philosophy of human nature and well-being.

Religious and philosophical underpinnings may differ between worldviews. However, cooperative communities today can glean from this love-compassion-care-based approach and relationship-building so central to many belief systems.

While secularism is on the rise and religious affiliation is declining, the need for meaningful life choices, deep relationships, and compassionate care communities is a core human need. Supporting those needs through pastoral care services at the community level can become a core service for cooperative communities. These services can cater to both religious and non-religious members. They can even facilitate meaningful conversations and common projects between the different religious and non-religious worldview traditions.

Humanistic, Cooperative Relationship Building

The editors of “Humanistic Governance in Democratic Organizations—The Cooperative Difference” recommend “real participation” and “dignity” to be embodied in the organization’s culture, processes, and relationships as follows⁹ (see next page):

Killick Coast North Seniors Co-operative

WHAT IS A CO-OP?

We Build Community - Together - We own it

The Co-op is formed by the members for the members, so the membership, as a whole, guides its operation.

Co-op members care about their community and want to help make it thrive.

WE own it! WE benefit! WE serve!

Being a Co-op member is a simple way to make a better life for you, your family and your community.

In our community everyone has a voice, a role to play, and a place to belong. Compassion, care, and putting relationships first are at the core of our community.

We cannot control all the factors that impact us. But as Co-op members, we have the chance for more say in the things that matter.

It's not about getting ahead of others. It's not about investors making profits.

It's about friends and neighbours. Looking after each other. Make our communities better. It's about creating a better place for all.

When a group of people with similar interests and needs pool their resources and are equally involved in the decision making process, that is a Co-op.

As co-operative, we are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. We believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others. We act within a framework of gender equity, diversity, inclusion, belonging, and anti-racism.

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International Year of Cooperatives 2025

Cooperatives Build a Better World

Courtesy of Thomas Mengel

1. Embed dignity as a guiding principle

Human beings are the purpose of the organization. Decisions should be evaluated by how they affect people's capacity for autonomy, growth, and belonging. Dignity, defined as "recognition of each person's intrinsic worth, voice, and contribution," must be explicitly protected in mission statements and performance measures.

2. Design inclusive and dialogical governance processes

Decision-making should allow genuine deliberation and dialogue. This requires including human needs and ethics in the decision-making processes and developing close relationships on a human level. It requires time and effort to get to know one another and to appreciate each other as fellow human beings.

3. Cultivate competence and capacity among members

Participation in such processes requires skills development. Training and mentoring sessions need to be offered to ensure members can comfortably engage and contribute meaningfully.

4. Balance expertise and democracy

Expertise of professionals must serve, not replace, democratic control. Members need to remain in control to avoid "democracy theater" with pro-forma participation.

5. Foster a culture of care and mutual respect

Dignity is lived through relationships. To enable and support these, the cooperatives need to nurture empathy and solidarity, compassionate (nonviolent) communication, and restorative conflict-resolution approaches.

6. Maintain reflexivity and feedback loops

Governance should include mechanisms to continuously question and renew itself. This can be achieved through regular surveys and assemblies evaluating participation quality and ensuring that people feel heard and respected.

7. Guard against drift toward market-driven governance

As cooperatives start to grow and to act within "the market," they risk mimicking market-driven behaviours of corporate entities. This can be mitigated by implementing term limits and rotation in governance roles, by participatory budgeting and strategic planning, and by embedding cooperative identity indicators in performance evaluation.

8. Extend dignity beyond the organization

Humanistic governance is relational and ecological. Decisions should consider the dignity of stakeholders—of partners, communities, and the environment beyond the co-op.

Next Steps and Recommendations

Members of our cooperatives and the public need to be able to see and feel the difference between a cooperative community and other organizations. The following recommendations may help (y)our cooperative communities to become more

(com-)passionate, caring, and loving communities:

1. Integrate "humanistic, cooperative relationship building" into your community building.¹⁰

2. Utilize resources from the "Charter for Compassion."¹¹

3. Connect and cooperate with community and care-oriented initiatives in your area.

4. Consider offering non-religious pastoral care services and facilitating multi-path conversations and initiatives.

5. Let's be bold in creating "love communities"¹² for the future.

Love will not prevent conflict, but it will offer ways of peaceful and compassionate solutions, and it will allow cooperative communities to develop a strong and sustainable identity, based on enduring personal relationships, and building a sense of belonging and of being at home. 

Thomas Mengel is a leadership scholar and practitioner, adult educator, computer scientist, historian, writer, futurist, and humanist (Chaplaincy candidate for Humanist Canada). In 2023 Thomas retired from the University of New Brunswick (Fredericton, Canada) and moved to Pouch Cove, Newfoundland and Labrador. He cofounded the Killick Coast North Seniors Co-operative and the Sunrise Funeral Co-operative. If he is not volunteering, reading, or writing, he can be found hiking or biking the East Coast Trail or the Coastal backroads on the Avalon Peninsula or exploring the rest of Newfoundland and Labrador. More about Thomas can be found on his website at www.thomasmengel.com.

1. See nlfc.coop/events/nlfc-agm-76.

2. See kcn seniors.coop; Mengel, T. (2025). The Future is Cooperative—What might it look like and how do we get there? in: COMMUNITIES, Issue 206, Spring 2025. Global Ecovillage Network—United States. pp. 31-34.

3. Charter For Compassion (2025). Available at charterforcompassion.org.

4. Relationships First NL (n.d.). Available at www.rfnl.org.

5. For example, Nav-CARE (n.d.). Making A Difference, Making Connections. Available at www.nav-care.ca; Nav-CARE (2025). Eastern Health, Newfoundland and Labrador. Available at peolc.easternhealth.ca/ourservices/nav-care; Compassionate, Dementia Inclusive Communities (CDIC) Project (n.d.) BC Centre for Palliative Care. Available at www.bc-cpc.ca/about-us/activities/new-projects/compassionate-dementia-inclusive-communities-project-2024-2027.

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7. Yu, S.; and Rizvi, S.J.R. (2025). The 2024 Top Co-op Issues Survey Report. Canadian Centre For The Study Of Co-operatives (CCSC). Saskatoon, SK, Canada: 2025, p. 1. Available at usaskstudies.coop/documents/research-reports/2024-top-co-op-issues-survey-report.pdf.

8. Tertullian, The Apology, Chapter 39.

9. Novković, S.; Miner, K.; & McMahon, C. (2023). Humanistic Governance in Democratic Organizations. The Cooperative Difference. Humanism in Business Series. Palgrave MacMillan: Open Access. Available at link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-17403-2.

10. Novković et al., *ibid*.

11. Charter For Compassion (2025). *Ibid*.

12. Love Community (n.d.) One Community. Available at oncommunityranch.org/love-community.

LETTERS

The Farm's Legacy Revisited

(continued from p. 5)

Some of our overly fast growth was just the revolutionary zeitgeist of the times, but a lot of it came from Stephen Gaskin and The Farm Band touring the country and encouraging people to join us. This seemed like a good idea at the time, although perhaps we should have become better established before proclaiming our success. We were nonviolent revolutionaries with a rock band instead of an army. The Reagan administration responded by quietly labeling us a domestic terrorist organization (this identity somehow escaped my notice), putting pressure on the banks we owed money to, and may have done more to ensure our demise. So I think the lesson for 21st century communities is: grow slowly, or at least carefully, and study Edward Snowden's revelations about COINTELPRO. It could happen to you.

If there is a visionary, charismatic, exceptionally articulate community member, treasure them and put them to good use, but remember, even if they're your guru, that they are human and fallible, and don't be afraid to challenge them. Sometimes our teachers teach us how to argue with them. But don't discard them or their message because of their failings. The message is more important than the character of the messenger.

As the future of America and the whole world grows ever more dire and unpredictable, we who espouse cooperation, sharing, simplicity, compassion, and ingenuity have a great deal to offer our wider communities. The Farm provides an excellent example of what is possible, and what could possibly go wrong. Its ultimate lesson should not be that an activist, income-sharing community won't work.

Martin Holsinger
Nashville, Tennessee

Editor's Note: See also Martin's article "Charisma Gained, Charisma Lost" on pages 16-19 of this issue.

EXPERIENCE COOPERATIVE LIVING IN NEW YORK CITY



Established in 1980, we are a 60 person intentional community. We live in 7 comfortable, well-maintained houses, with gardens and a small swimming pool, on the north shore of Staten Island, a short walk from the free ferry to Manhattan.

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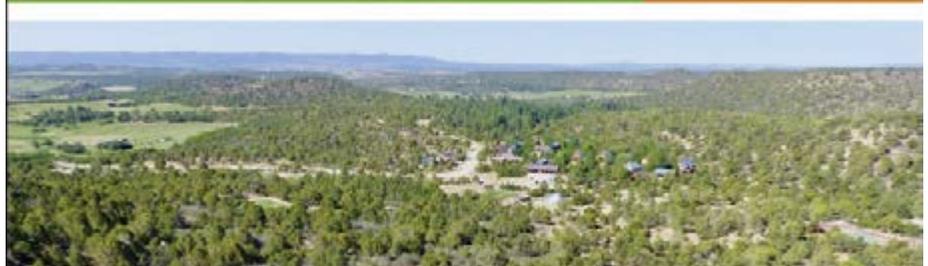
If you are interested, contact Susan at info@ganas.org

For more information see www.ganas.org



Heartwood Cohousing

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and Nature
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in Gorgeous
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Heartwood is an established cohousing community (move-in was in 2000) that now has a second phase of 14 new homes under construction. We're a close-knit, rural community located in one of the most beautiful spots on earth – where the Rocky Mountains meet red rock canyons and the sun shines over 300 days per year.

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THE REACH DEADLINE FOR ISSUE #211 Summer 2026 (out in June) is April 30, 2026. Rates: ≤50 words: \$35/issue; ≤100 words: \$60/issue; ≤150 words: \$85/issue. You may pay using a credit or debit card, bank transfer (contact the Advertising Manager), or via check or money order payable to Communities (include all ad info) mailed to Communities, 330 Morgan St., Oberlin, OH 44074.

COMMUNITIES WITH OPENINGS

GANAS COMMUNITY, a 65-person intentional community, in Staten Island NY, has space available for new members. We live in 8 houses with connected gardens, and are a short walk from the ferry to Manhattan. Monthly expenses are \$1000 per month and include room, food, utilities, laundry facilities, toiletries, and WIFI. Learn about collective decision making, problem solving and community living at Ganas. Share resources and shrink your carbon footprint. For more info go to www.ganas.org or contact Susan at info@ganas.org.

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A practical guide for how to start a residential intentional community from the framework of addressing the racial, social, ecological and economic disparities affecting all aspects of our lived experience.

FOUNDATION FOR INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

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scription: \$29.95/year. Postal subscription: \$34.95/year. Published since 1983. The Caretaker Gazette, 1205 E 31st Street, Austin TX 78722. (206) 462-1818; To learn more, please visit www.caretaker.org.

PUBLICATIONS, BOOKS, WEBSITES, WORKSHOPS, EVENTS

JUST PUBLISHED new book: "Green Politics and the Greening of Society." Steven Welzer explains why the much-needed "greening" of our society will involve an eco-communitarian and bioregional transition. Copies can be purchased at amazon.com or directly from the author: StevenWelzer@gmail.com.

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

ICSA CONFERENCE, July 9-11, 2026: Join us at Lebensgarten Ecovillage, Germany, for Intentional Community Resilience in an Age of Uncertainty. Explore research, share experiences, and connect with both researchers and people living in communities. Call for Papers, registration, membership, and accommodation details available now. Learn more and register at: www.icsacommunity.org.



UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTHERN INDIANA
Center for Communal Studies

About the USI Center for Communal Studies

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

SCAN ME



The Center for Communal Studies offers unmatched resources for scholars and communitarians, interested in the lessons that utopia in theory and practice can offer to the world at large.

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Just minutes from downtown Iowa City, this tranquil, energy-efficient 960-square-foot home offers peaceful surroundings within the vibrant Prairie Hill Cohousing Community. This 2-bedroom, 1-bath home provides its own kitchen, laundry, and large deck. As well as private back deck with wooded views. 184 Prairie Hill Lane Iowa City, IA 52246. \$314,000.

While enjoying your private home, you'll also have access to shared amenities of the community. Learn more about Prairie Hill Cohousing at prairiehillcoho.org.

Robert Archer and Janie Evans
(530) 906-6064
robertjanie@gmail.com

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Rustic cabins with private waterfront
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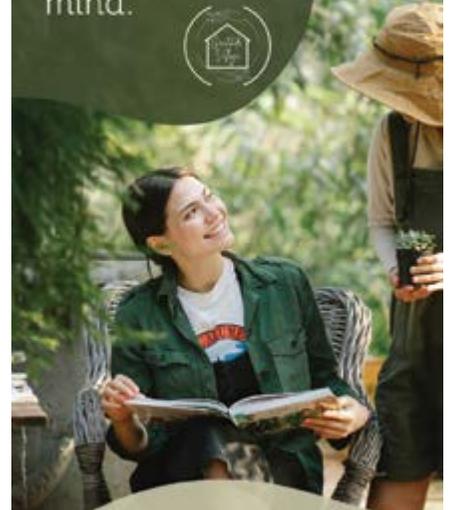
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Altair EcoVillage
Cohousing forming in PA

We invite you to support Altair EcoVillage, a 55+ environmentally-friendly neighborhood of 29 homes to be built in 2026. Using the social model of Cohousing, which promotes sharing resources and participatory community management, Altair will have low energy bills, a ride-share program, and community gardens.

Invest \$50,000 or more and receive 7.5% APR applied to your two-story townhouse or flat, or up to 5% APR return on investment at the end of the project. Join 6 future residents and 11 investor/home owners who have purchased 9 acres in the historic rural center at Kimberton and helped shepherd the zoning, design, and approvals to realize our vision. The site is two miles west of the bustling town of Phoenixville and 30 miles northwest of Philadelphia.

Contact Us:
altairecovillage@gmail.com
www.AltairEcoVillage.org



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- **Ecovillage Experience Weekend**
June 4-7
- **Ecovillage Experience Week**
July 26-Aug 1

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GLOBAL ECOVILLAGE NETWORK UPDATES: COP30 and More

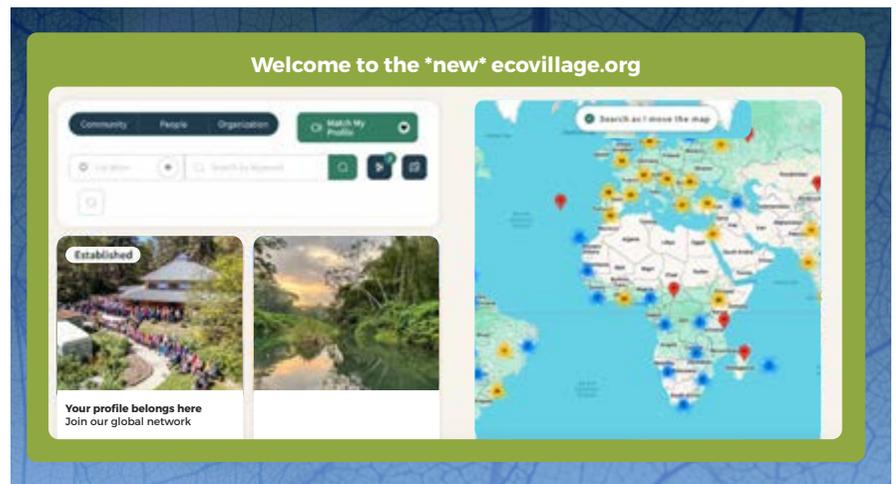
In 2026, the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) is opening a new doorway into the ecovillage movement with the upcoming launch of a reimagined global ecovillage map and online platform, created in collaboration with the Foundation for Intentional Community (FIC). More than a directory, the map is a living invitation for connection and a way for ecovillages, seekers, founders, and educators to discover one another, learn from lived experience, and connect across cultures. Stay tuned!

Alongside this platform, GEN continues to strengthen the visibility of community-led solutions in global policy spaces. A recent highlight has been engagement at COP30 through partner initiatives and allied projects, helping amplify ecovillage perspectives on climate action, Indigenous knowledge systems, and Rights of Nature. (See ecovillage.org/gen-at-cop30.) These contributions emphasize the deeply human and cultural dimensions of ecological transition, revealing how a global ecovillage network allows community-scale solutions to be seen, shared, and

recognized as vital pathways toward global climate goals.

At the regional level, GEN networks are expanding peer-to-peer learning opportunities. In Europe, Africa, the Americas, and Asia-Pacific, ecovillages are hosting trainings on regenerative land stewardship, cooperative governance, and inclusive economic models.

Learn more at ecovillage.org.



The 15th International Communal Studies Association Conference

**FINAL ROUND OF
PROPOSALS DUE
MARCH 15 2026**



LEBENSGARTEN, GERMANY
JULY 9TH -11TH 2026
www.icsacommunity.org

Present academic papers, guide workshops, lead cultural events, host discussions, or simply attend!
Meet communarians from all around the world!
A conference for the community curious and committed scholar alike!

BUILDING THE **FUTURE** TOGETHER: INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES AND COLLECTIVE CHANGE

Welcome to 2026! The **Foundation for Intentional Community (FIC)** is stepping into the new year with a sense of new beginnings and emerging potential. Our team is asking bold questions and taking purposeful steps that will shape not only the future of FIC, but the future of intentional communities as a movement.

If we are to create systemic change, we must build entirely new systems. When we challenge structures that oppress and fracture our interdependence, we cannot then replicate them in our own work. This invites deeper questions: How do we move beyond imagining a collective future to actively creating it together? Where do intentional communities fit within this shared story? And how can FIC best serve the movement as it evolves?

Through lived experience, we know that healing and cooperation begin with gathering and relationship building. It is in these spaces that we learn from one another, strengthen trust, and act creatively. We believe it is in this space that we will build thriving mutual aid systems between intentional communities, our neighbors, and other organizations doing adjacent work.

After two years of organizing a Convergence of Intentional Communities (CIC), FIC is now

stepping into its role as part of a broader network to help cultivate a shared CIC vision. Together, we envision thriving, self-governed networks of intentional communities and allies working strategically and imaginatively to meet shared challenges and nurture a cooperative culture.

Moving forward, we will support **regional convergences across the United States, each shaped by local needs.** These gatherings will invite allied organizations into collaboration and explore how intentional communities can learn from, and stand in solidarity with, those beyond the IC movement. This may include restoring local waterways, providing housing for vulnerable neighbors, supporting gender-affirming healthcare, or tending to the intergenerational transfer of wisdom within aging communities.

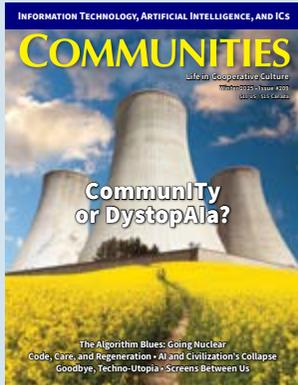
By weaving together the insights from each regional convergence, we can create a larger narrative of solidarity, mutual aid, and shared responsibility. **We know that meaningful change cannot happen in isolation.** Intentional communities are uniquely positioned to be part of the solution. The intentional communities movement has an abundance of knowledge to share—and still, so much yet to learn.

Visit ic.org for more updates



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Diverse groups help to provide support, education, and networking for those interested in and/or living in ecovillages and other intentional communities worldwide, including:

- FIC (Foundation for Intentional Community): ic.org
- BIPOC ICC (BIPOC Intentional Communities Council): bipocicc.org
- CohoUS (Cohousing Association of the United States): cohousing.org
- CSA (Communal Studies Association): communalstudies.org
- ICSA (International CSA): icsacommunity.org
- GEN (Global Ecovillage Network): ecovillage.org and its regions:
ecovillage.org/region/gen-africa
ecovillage.org/region/gen-europe
ecovillage.org/region/casa
ecovillage.org/region/genoa
ecovillage.org/region/genna
- NextGEN (Youth Network): nextgen-ecovillage.org

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

gen-us.net/subscribe

Do you know that there are nearly one thousand intentional communities just in the United States?

Check out the online hub for intentional communities!

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Come visit us at

ic.org/cmag



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