How Communalism Inspired a US Senate Run • Auroville

Communities

Life in Cooperative Culture

Fall 2024 • Issue #204
$10 US / $13 Canada

Politics

The Great Schism • Internalized Capitalism
Consensus and Sociocracy • Engaging Difficult Knowledge
My Year in a Toxic Community

Issue #204
Fall 2024

POLITICS

4

Notes from the Editor: Withdrawal and Engagement

Chris Roth

Not only in the larger society, but also in the smaller societies of intentional communities, the whole is more "whole," and more resilient, when all participate, especially those who may feel initially uncomfortable doing so.

6

Another Quintessential Commune Moment

Valerie, RatzoSkull, McCune

Political drama hits letter-readers and writers in Twin Oaks' Zhankoye lounge.

8

Bringing Love to the Heart of the Beast: How Communalism Inspired a US Senate Run

Yana Ludwig

I'm grateful to have been able to export a little of the feisty commitment to direct democracy that characterizes the communities movement and insert it into the heart of the beast for those 15 months.

10

Auroville: A Vision Under Siege— Autonomy vs. Authoritarianism

Viduthalai Ottrumai

Can collective action still counteract authoritarian tendencies, despite many instances of tightening global control by government and powerful economic entities? Auroville provides a test case.

14

Engaging Difficult Knowledge: Experiencing Power, Race, and Presence in Communities

Jahia LaSangoma

I cannot help myself from looking around these more isolated communities and thinking about the conversations which have never happened before without the presence of people of color.

18

The Great Schism

O.W.G.

Of course the blame may fall upon me, my age or gender or race or "privilege." Youth and age, the more left-leaning learning proffered to the young, are all part of the entangled dynamics fueling political and emotional divides.

20

Tricky Issues with BIPOC and Well-Meaning White Community Members

Diana Leafe Christian

As we stumble along this steep learning curve, let's welcome the future with greater awareness of racial injustice historically and of our own stuck issues and blind spots, and develop considerably more kindness, compassion, and grace.

22

Challenges in Inclusivity

Laird Schaub

Rather than voting off the island everyone who is unacceptably different, how can we disagree about how to view and respond to issues when the stakes are high, and reliably have that exploration bring us closer together?

ON THE COVER

Tragedy, comedy, or historical drama? Politics can be any or all of these, as well as the seedbed of our collective future, both in community and out. All the world's a stage during Fair preparations at the Oregon Country Fairgrounds, just south of Politics Park on the "8," June 29, 2024. See also p. 6. Photo by Chris Roth.

Communities
Life in Cooperative Culture

EDITOR
Chris Roth *(Lost Valley/Meadowsong)*

ART DIRECTOR
Yulia Zarubina-Brill

ADVERTISING MANAGER
Joyce Bressler *(Community of Living Traditions)*

ACCOUNTANT
Kim Scheidt *(Red Earth Farms)*

BACK ISSUE ORDER FULFILMENT
Chris Roth/Volunteers *(Lost Valley/Meadowsong)*

PUBLISHER LIAISONS
Diana Leafe Christian *(Earthaven)*
Keala Young *(Atlan)*

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

SUBSCRIPTIONS: $30 US, $40 outside US for four issues via periodical/surface mail. Supporters add $10 per year; Sustainers add $20 per year. Digital-only subscriptions cost $10 less. Single copies are $10 postpaid US, $13 postpaid Canada, $18 postpaid other international. All payments in US dollars. Available from Communities, c/o 330 Morgan St., Oberlin, OH 44074; order@gen-us.net; 541-937-5221 for more info. (please leave message); gen-us.net/subscribe.

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

BACK ISSUE CONTENT: See complete back issue article index at gen-us.net/index, and index by community at gen-us.net/index-by-community. See back issue themes at gen-us.net/themes.

EDITORIAL OFFICE: Chris Roth, Editor, Communities, 81868 Lost Valley Ln, Dexter OR 97431; editor@gen-us.net; 541-937-5221 (please leave message).

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

ADVERTISING: Joyce Bressler, Communities Advertising Manager, ads@gen-us.net; 845-558-4492.

WEBSITE: gen-us.net/communities.

This magazine printed by Sundance Press, Tucson AZ.

Notes from the Editor BY CHRIS ROTH

Withdrawal and Engagement


Chris Roth

Every issue of Communities seems to take on a life of its own—and thankfully, #204 has been no exception.

Its theme was first announced online and in Call for Articles emails as "Political Engagement," morphed into "Political Engagement, Governance, and Power," and ended up as simply "Politics." My initial version of this Note went into excruciating detail about how these shifts came about, with text worthy of a rambling convention speech. Fortunately, Communities articles don't leap immediately into print, so I am spared the humiliation and you are spared the boredom of reading about something that may be a powerful stimulant to editors but a sleep aid to most others.

Amidst the rubble of this story, I have found a few artifacts worth pointing out:

I was eager to focus on "engagement" by communitarians, both within their own communities and in the wider world, as an antidote to the misconception that communities are, or should be, places to escape the wider world and all its political challenges. This nonviable idea is present not only among some community seekers but even among some communitarians, and is also the backbone of a common prejudice against intentional communities. Yet any seasoned communitarian knows that "escape" is impossible; what we may be trying to exclude from our reality almost inevitably manifests in microcosm in our own interactions within community, carried there by us.

Superficiality combined with personality dramas often involving egotism, hypocrisy, self-interest, and pettiness seem to plague too much of what many people think of as "politics" on the broader scale. We may better maintain our individual sanity and agency if we *don't* tune into the constant updates about it all, available to anyone with access to modern communication devices. Too frequently in the larger society "politics" becomes another disempowering consumer product, a form of entertainment and distraction from our own immediate circumstances (and incidentally, also from the deeper issues affecting the world).

But saying "no" to 24/7 news-cycle politics does not mean we need to disengage entirely from the political realm, nor that we can't be more discerning and measured about how we take it in. Even when mainstream politics itself becomes escapist consumer fodder, there is no escape from the larger issues that affect us all, that have molded our lives and help determine how we live now and in the future. Only the extremely privileged can cultivate the illusion of absolute escape, an illusion that always carries an unknown but certain expiration date.

The transformations we need in our wider politics happen when individuals find the courage to engage—often in uncomfortable ways—to try to make a difference. Their engagement does not automatically make them "part of the problem," but sometimes "part of the solution." (Translation: all "politicians" are not the same. Often, they're just "people," in all their complexity and diversity, writ large by their position in our society, whether for good or ill. In fact, with a different outcome four years ago, our lead author would be among them today.)

• • •

Not only in the larger society, but also in the smaller societies of intentional communities, the whole is more "whole," and more resilient, when all participate, especially those who may feel initially uncomfortable doing so. But ironically, just as many communitarians are reluctant to engage in a wider world that often clashes with their values, many paradoxically also prefer to withdraw from the active efforts within their own communities to create an alternative, choosing to leave internal organizational and governance matters entirely up to others.

I believe this is also a mistake and misjudgment. In my own experience, all of our lives become richer when we each choose to engage in our groups' internal political processes and culture, in whatever ways align with our own natures.

Within human-scaled intentional communities, we have a chance to forge different paths forward, act and interact in healthier ways than may be common in the wider world (see many of the stories in this issue for examples). The next step is sharing those, however we are able, in the broader realm as well. If we don't do so, communities risk becoming isolated utopian experiments, doomed to fall into irrelevance. If we do (for example, by sharing stories in forums like this one), we have a chance of making the kind of difference the world needs.

That does not mean each of us needs to run for political office (although we might make that choice too—see the lead article in this issue). But when an election comes around, as is happening this November in the US, I hope it also means that we will exercise the right that countless people have fought and even died for—the right to vote.

A tiny example of how it can matter is Communities' costly series of mailing woes, directly resulting from the outcome of the 2016 election and decisions made by the political megadonor subsequently installed as Postmaster General (we now mail in envelopes to protect magazines from being destroyed by the new sorting machines; "efficiency" likewise now means that a letter mailed from one address in Dexter or Eugene, Oregon to another makes a 200+mile fossil-fuel-powered round trip before it is delivered). Worse has been the impact on reproductive rights, democratic safeguards, lost years of confronting the climate crisis, etc.; and thanks to lifetime Supreme Court appointments, some of these losses become even more challenging to reverse. Yet if an additional one-tenth of one percent of the number of US citizens who voted in 2016 had cast ballots *against* these possibilities then (instead of not voting at all), in certain swing states that determined the electoral college outcome, these impacts could have been averted.

When even a small fraction of the electorate concludes that voting makes no difference, the difference it makes can become even more palpable.

When even a small fraction of the electorate concludes that voting makes no difference, the difference it makes can become even more palpable.

• • •

In the end, we expanded the theme beyond "Engagement" and added new article prompts, transforming the flow of submissions from a trickle to a near-flood. The resulting issue is richer for it. The material ranges further, looking at recent widespread polarization, authoritarian governmental takeovers, attempts to right historical wrongs, the persistence/resurgence of prejudices, the roles of unexamined privilege, unconscious habits, and unhealthy psychological trends, and much more—as well as their impacts within intentional communities. These pieces also suggest responses to those challenges, and ways of encouraging healthier approaches to politics whether at the small or large scale.

I hope you appreciate these diverse stories as much as I have...and can persuade your fellow communitarians and others that engagement, both within and outside community—including, this November, through voting in the US—actually matters. ❧

Note: Space constraints prevented us from illustrating last issue's Notes from the Editor fully, and thus readers didn't get visual representations of the previous "Conflict and Connection" issue (Communities #104), *nor of the music discussed in the piece. To compensate, we have posted extra graphics online at* ***gen-us.net/mirrors****, and also included at that same link a recording of the song quoted in the article, Laura Kemp's "The Reflection." Please check it out!*

Chris Roth has edited Communities *since 2008, and is a longtime member of Lost Valley/Meadowsong (lostvalley.org) outside Dexter, Oregon.*

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 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.

Another Quintessential Commune Moment

Text by Valerie, Illustration by RatzoSkull,
Labour Credits by McCune

A Project of the Renmick-Porter Art Internship, Twin Oaks, August 2021

Walking into the lounge at ZK and finding people reading the series of mailbox letters, including yours, about the latest community drama

COVER REVISITED: MASKS, PARTIES, POLITICS

We received feedback just before press time that, given the blue and red/orange masks it depicts, this issue's cover might be construed as some kind of partisan commentary on US politics and even, perversely, an endorsement of the smiling mask's party. We wish to nip this conspiracy theory in the bud by stating that while the mask colors did evoke "politics" to us, the expressions on those masks were incidental, not in our control, and played no part in the choice of this cover photo, which ended up as our only viable cover option anyway.

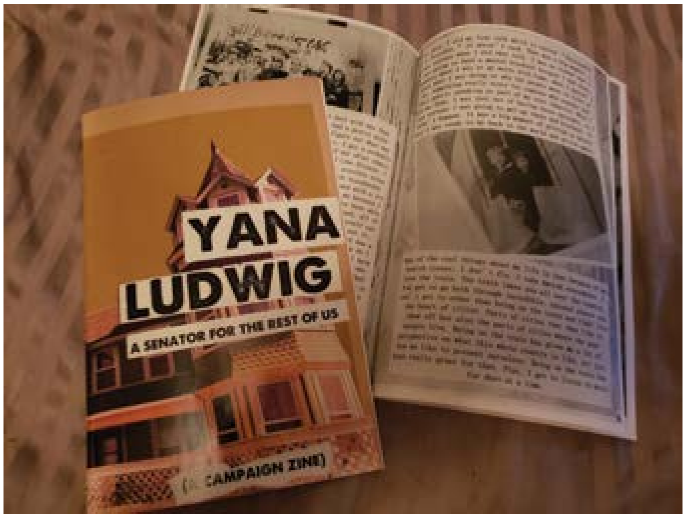
However, if you want to assign meaning to the mask expressions, please note that the photo dates from two days after a certain disastrous presidential debate, and does rather accurately reflect political moods at that moment. In Politics as in all of life, things change, and thankfully that is also true metaphorically for these masks since then—and would be true physically too if we could repaint them and retake the photo.

—CR

BRINGING LOVE TO THE HEART OF THE BEAST

How Communalism Inspired a US Senate Run

By Yana Ludwig



One of the many ways I tell my life story is to say that it has been a slow and fitful process of learning to love more and more groups of people, and learning how that love needs to be expressed.

1992 was a big year for that. That year I both came out as bisexual and ran head-first into my own racism. It was a year of taking some huge steps back from what I thought I knew about myself to look at who and how I loved.

But the year that most firmly solidified this pattern was 1996. That was the year I moved into my first full-on, self-labeled intentional community, and discovered my deep-seated love-hate relationship with people. For the next two-and-a-half decades of communal living, I found myself both responsible for some role of governance and really not liking some of the people I was crafting policy to help and support. I learned to be a facilitator because I could see how my impatience with some people and philosophies wasn't actually serving the communities I lived in.

In late 2018, I was living in Wyoming (a state that did little to de-escalate my love-hate relationship with people). A friend of mine who had watched me facilitate conversations, speak out on controversial topics, and work to build community in a fairly hostile environment encouraged me to put my name forward for a write-in campaign for the local conservation district, and without thinking too much about it, I said, "Sure." It was late enough that most people had already voted, and I came up a few votes shy of winning, but that near-miss with public office got me thinking.

Up until then, Politics (with a capital P) hadn't really been something I was willing to engage. Generally speaking, I'd rather protest an elected official than be one. But the internal obligation to serve—even when the majority of people I'd be serving were very different from me—was by then thoroughly coded into my being.

Community living had changed my sense of an individual's relationship to society. It was more about ethical obligations to society than personal rights to do whatever the hell I want to do. And my willingness to show up as a public figure had been solidified in 2015 when I spent six months on the road on a national speaking tour focused on community responses to climate disruption.

Climate activism was really what did it. I looked around in early 2019 at who might be running for what would be an open US Senate seat, and decided that there wasn't anyone both really serious about climate science and with a solid understanding of the racial and class dynamics that pin climate disruption in. And when I looked at the international and domestic dynamics around serious climate action, the US Senate looked like the choke point affecting literally billions of people across the planet.

Community had made my heart big enough to consider spending six years in the snake pit of DC to try to make some difference.

It was a long shot: do you have any idea how long it's been since a Democrat represented Wyoming in DC? I do now—it's been half a century. And running as an openly queer socialist who was living in a commune might have been especially uphill, except I had one advantage over the rest of the Democratic field: when someone accused me of being a socialist (which happens to anyone running as a Democrat in the state) I could catch people off-guard by saying, "Yes. Can we talk about what that actually means?"

So in June 2019, I declared as a candidate for US Senate in the most conservative state in the country. And I took my whole self on the road. I took big paper pads with me and every time I made a campaign stop, the tail end of my "stump speech" involved whipping out markers and facilitating a conversation about what people actually wanted.

We organized fast food workers and hotel cleaning staff, and queer people and youth. We got the endorsements of climate groups and the only truly leftist political entities in the state.

It was utterly disconcerting to all the right people. One of my favorite moments was a radio interview in which I was patiently explaining to the show host that socialism means worker ownership—worker control of the "means of production," to quote Marx. What was supposed to be an eight-minute slot turned into nearly 25 minutes of back and forth with him repeatedly asking, "But who owns it?!?" in an increasingly bewildered voice. That we could take the kind of direct democracy that I had been living with for years as a communard (as imperfect as it is) and translate that into workplace democracy was the cause of much cognitive dissonance in Wyoming politics that year.

And ultimately, that's what it was about. While I would have (happily?) gone to DC to represent a state whose people I readily admit I had a love-hate relationship with, the real goal was to pry open the Overton Window, take conversations that had never even been on the table in that fossil fuel state, and place them, for a few brief moments, in the center.

I ended up placing second in the most crowded Democratic primary Wyoming had ever seen. While I have no desire to ever do it again, I also have no regrets. And I'm grateful to have been able to export a little of the feisty commitment to direct democracy that characterizes the communities movement and insert it into the heart of the beast for those 15 months. ❧

Yana Ludwig is a cooperative culture pioneer and anti-oppression activist, with deep roots in the communities movement. She served on the Foundation for Intentional Community board for over 10 years, and is a trainer and consultant for communities, worker-owned cooperatives, and nonprofits. She is the author of Together Resilient: Building Community in the Age of Climate Disruption, The Cooperative Culture Handbook *(with Karen Gimnig), and* Building Belonging: Your Guide to Starting a Residential Intentional Community. *She was a host on the Solidarity House podcast, focusing on cooperative culture, economics, and law, and was a cofounder of an income-sharing, anti-capitalist commune in Wyoming, where she lived when the Politics bug bit her. Yana currently serves as the Executive Director of the North Coast Food Web in Astoria, Oregon.*

Photos courtesy of Yana Ludwig

AUROVILLE: A Vision Under Siege—Autonomy vs. Authoritarianism

By Viduthalai Ottrumai

Aurovilians gather in community for a giant potluck, August 2022.

In the global mosaic of intentional communities, Auroville stands out as a unique experiment. Sometimes called "the city the earth needs," the international township in South India was founded in 1968 based on the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother (Mirra Alfassa).

Auroville's principles are rooted in the practice of "integral yoga," an approach to conscious living, and in the ideal of manifesting human unity. For almost six decades it has remained a place where people from around the world could live in harmony, focused on simultaneously developing inner practice and sustainable alternatives to the western consumerist juggernaut that seems to be accelerating toward multifaceted collapse. Recognized by UNESCO and the Government of India, since its beginnings the small community has been widely lauded as a pioneer in sustainable living and environmental conservation; its practices and achievements in reforestation (over three million trees planted), sustainable building technologies, water catchment, organic farming, and renewable energy are globally recognized as models for sustainable development.

The Auroville Charter emphasizes the importance of unending education, spiritual research, and a collective effort towards human progress, ideals representing an aspiration for a world free from the divisions of nationality, race, and religion. In a world increasingly divided by these very issues, Auroville is home to around 3,500 people from over 60 nationalities, an example of unity in diversity, and offers living proof of our capacity for peaceful coexistence and productivity despite apparent differences.

Auroville community gathers to sing "One Day," a song of peace and of hope, 8th February 2023.

Auroville is one of the longest-running intentional communities in the world, and by far the largest and most diverse.

Eroding the Dream

As is the case for many ideals across the planet, the dream of Auroville is under siege. Facing an accelerated takeover characterized by administrative overreach, political bullying, shady power plays, and money deals, this is not just a local issue but one with significant implications for all who aspire to a different way of living. The appointment in late 2021 of a new Governing Board and its Secretary, Dr. Jayanti Ravi, marked a significant shift towards centralized power. These are Government of India-appointed bodies who take part in Auroville's administrative management, until now consistently in collaboration with the residents of Auroville. The current unfolding imposition of authoritarian governance has severely impacted Auroville's autonomy, sustainability efforts, and social fabric, leading to widespread tension and instability within the community.

Much of this turmoil results directly from the systematic dismantling of Auroville's decentralized governance structures. Key internal working groups and committees responsible for critical areas, such as administration, public relations, media, town-planning, and finances, have been overrun and replaced. These bodies, previously steered by the residents, now operate under appointees with little loyalty to the community's traditional ethos. The new administration's top-down approach starkly contrasts with Auroville's foundational ideal of collaborative and democratic principles. Decisions impacting the community at large are frequently made unilaterally, often without transparency or consultation, fostering an atmosphere of coercion and fear.

Until recently, the Residents' Assembly has been central to Auroville's self-governance; majority vote determines and directs the township's daily life. It is a legally appointed model which has allowed Aurovillians to address communal needs and challenges collectively and organically, albeit slowly, and this ability to participate in key decisions has fostered a deep sense of ownership and responsibility. While clearly imperfect, experimental, and still evolving, this dynamic attempt at democratic process is now systematically ignored. Despite overwhelming opposition from the Aurovillian majority, the Governing Board's

Meeting of the Auroville Residents' Assembly to discuss one year of takeovers, 20th January 2023.

Photos by Dominique Darr

The Darkali Forested Park, May 2021. This park is now partly destroyed for a circular road project.

> The current crisis in Auroville challenges its ideals of human unity, sustainable living, participatory governance, and the integration of spiritual and material progress.

Representatives of the Auroville community meditating around the Peace Table, July 2022.

Secretary claims "supreme authority," using her post as a Government of India officer to nullify the Assembly's decisions and stifle the community's collective voice. This imposition of external governance structures threatens a long-term participatory model, underscoring the wider importance of safeguarding democratic processes and ensuring that community voices are heard and respected.

The erosion of governance extends to the marginalization of professional expertise within the community. Qualified individuals in critical fields such as sustainable architecture, water management, and ecological restoration have been dismissed and even denied visa renewal and expelled from India. Their replacements, often unqualified, are drawn from a small cadre politically aligned with the new Secretary, often leading to decisions that disregard Auroville's long-term environmental and social sustainability. Residents face threats of eviction, housing loss, and discontinuation of critical financial allowances, and in several cases the nuisance of spurious court cases filed against them and IT scrutiny. Visa restrictions for foreign residents, some of whom have lived in Auroville for decades or were even born there, add to the instability, and have been weaponized against dissent. This atmosphere of intimidation has severely undermined the community spirit and the sense of safety that Auroville once embodied.

A Summary of Recent Events

Asset and Housing Control: Opaque "land exchanges" without accountability have resulted in real estate losses estimated at over 15 million US dollars to the community, raising unresolved concerns. The new Governing Board has taken control of Auroville's physical development, funds, budgets, housing, and communal assets. A rewritten housing policy allows appointees to evict residents without due process, even when they financed and built their own homes.

Financial Mismanagement: The Auroville Foundation Office has mismanaged funds, cutting stipends and budgets for residents and their municipal services, leaving many Aurovillians without financial support. This has created significant hardships for those affected, considering that a majority of Aurovillians subsist on a minimal monthly stipend and reside in India under government auspices as "honorary voluntary workers."

Silencing Resident Representatives: The Governing Board has created parallel groups to replace important majority-elected committees of the Residents' Assembly, including the Working Committee. New regulations aim to give the Governing Board full authority over selecting the Working Committee, again effectively seeking to silence the Residents' Assembly. These regulations have been stayed by the Madras High Court.

Environmental Destruction: The crisis has been marked by large-scale tree cutting and land clearing, the enforcement of an outdated development master plan leading to the violent bulldozing of forests and water catchment areas, as well as the destruction of residents' homes. The clearing of protected forests continued in blatant disregard of a National Green Tribunal verdict that required proper environmental clearances for development. These actions starkly contrast Auroville's ethos of ecological stewardship, reflecting an orientation shift towards growth-at-all-costs, high-density, concrete-centric development, undermining the township's sustainable foundations.

Control over Admissions and Terminations: New regulations published in December 2023 allow a scrutinizing committee appointed by the Governing Board to control who can join or be expelled from Auroville, an extensive process previously handled by Residents' Assembly-elected working groups. This has led to fears of losing Auroville's sociocultural diversity and the free expression of diverse perspectives. These regulations appear to be against the Auroville Foundation Act and have been temporarily stayed by the Madras High Court in India. A final judgment is awaited.

Privatization and Outsourcing: Plans are underway to outsource Auroville's health sector to private companies and institutions, and the road is being paved, literally, to transform it into a spiritual tourism site. Large events have been organized without community involvement, and misleading information is being distributed to visitors.

Media Outreach: Control over Auroville's communication networks has tightened to a stranglehold, with the new administration seizing the main email server as well as online platforms such as the outreach media, all under the pretext of preventing anti-government activities. This has led to the deletion of comments and accounts, and the stifling of free expression. Loss of community control over the Auroville Archives raises fears of historical revisionism and a possibly warped makeover of Auroville's history.

Reflecting a Broader Global Context

Auroville's struggle seems not an isolated incident but rather a reflection of broader global trends. The centralization of power, suppression of democratic process, and prioritization of commercial interests over sustainability as seen in Auroville are emblematic of issues faced by communities worldwide. As regards development vs. ecological preservation, the forced imposition of profit-oriented development practices in Auroville is yet another instance of environmental sustainability sacrificed for economic gain. Ongoing privatization of communal assets and financial misappropriation in Auroville reflect an unfortunate global trend towards increased concentration of wealth into the hands of a minority, broadly serving to exacerbate social inequalities and undermine communal welfare.

The current crisis in Auroville challenges its ideals of human unity, sustainable living, participatory governance, and the integration of spiritual and material progress. Despite almost 60 years of toil dedicated to building this "city the earth needs," the accelerated takeover of Auroville threatens to dismantle the very fabric of this unique experiment. If Auroville fails to maintain its integrity, it would demonstrate that such experiments in human unity are vulnerable to external and internal pressures, and raise questions about the feasibility of similar initiatives worldwide. In contrast, the lessons learned from Auroville's crisis could inform global efforts to create sustainable communities that are resilient against political and administrative disruptions.

Can collective action still counteract authoritarian tendencies, despite many instances of tightening global control by government and powerful economic entities? The battle for Auroville shows that communities can and should fight for their values and rights, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Despite exhausting challenges, community members continue to rally around their rights and ideals, seeking legal recourse and mobilizing support both locally and globally. Despite censorship and gaslighting narratives, the crisis continues to attract international attention and alliance, a show of solidarity underscoring our interconnectedness and collective responsibility to support communities striving for peace, sustainability, and unity.

The community's response to these challenges and its efforts to maintain the integrity of its founding vision are not only crucial for the survival of Auroville, but symbolic of humanity's resilience in the face of oppression. Auroville was always envisioned as a microcosm of the whole, a living laboratory in which the universal struggles of humanity could be unraveled and worked through in a model setting; as such, this struggle can be seen as representative of broader, universal fights for local autonomy, environmental sustainability, and true community cohesiveness in the face of strangling dependency on centralized control. As we collectively grapple with senseless war, environmental crises, and governance challenges, the situation in Auroville reminds us of the critical importance of upholding and defending our highest ideals, and the need for a robust network of local and global support systems to sustain the people-driven communities dedicated to creating a better world.

For those interested in supporting Auroville or learning more, the "Voice of Auroville" journal provides detailed updates and perspectives from the community. You can access their publications and get involved through their website (auroville.media/voa). ❧

Viduthalai Ottrumai writes under a pseudonym. Communities *invites responses to this piece by others involved in the unfolding events at Auroville, or in similar circumstances elsewhere.*

Auroville residents organise a Peace Meditation under the Matrimandir Banyan Tree, 8th November 2022.

ENGAGING DIFFICULT KNOWLEDGE[1]:

Experiencing Power, Race, and Presence in Communities

By Jahia LaSangoma

In my 10 years of experience visiting intentional communities, it seems to me that the presence of people of color—at least, of those of us uninterested in being agreeable diversity tokens—in majority white spaces is an unwanted link to the uncomfortable realities, histories, and justice movements of the world which could otherwise well be ignored in the bubble made by a majority- or all-white community.

In the winter of 2024, I stayed for a trial period at a forming ecological project in Portugal. I was excited to get back on the road, as I missed the vibrant experiences of my late teens and early 20s when I regularly visited intentional communities to learn about ways of living together outside of the mainstream. My goal was never to join the group in question as a resident, but to see if it would be a fit for implementing a project as an intern. If the proposed one month trial proved a fit, I would have stayed for 12 weeks; in the end, I stayed for less than a month before informing the Project Manager that I would be leaving exactly 26 days after arriving.

The night I decided to leave, there was a send-off campfire for a volunteer who had stayed at the project through the Willing Workers on Organic Farms (WWOOF) program. I had been cordial, yet intentionally distant with this volunteer as they were a white person with "dreadlocks," who on the first day I met them questioned why on earth I would want to build a project for only Queer BIPOC people.

I am a Black woman who proudly wears dreadlocks as a sign of my liberation from white supremacy in the tradition of self-freed Maroons[2] from Jamaica (OG intentional communities!). The Maroons of Jamaica were said to have dreaded their hair as a sign of freedom after escaping enslavement—often fleeing with nothing more than a machete—through dense jungle and over razor-sharp cliffsides. I've learned that if a white person is still wearing culturally appropriated hairstyles in 2024, with so much information available online[3] to dissuade them from doing so, that my energy is better spent placing a firm, yet humane, boundary on the extent of my interactions with them for my own well-being.

Memories and experiences of our ancestors remain with us for generations (according to a 2017 study of nematode worms, adult animals hold an estimated 14 generations of memory in our DNA).

The topic around the fire eventually came to hijinks and run-ins with police; mind you, I was the only person of color at the project after the departure two weeks earlier of an older Korean woman who was a guest of the project's owner. The circle of white, European workers and volunteers at the project had seemingly endless stories about their close yet somehow always humorous interactions with the law: traffic police, border security, and immigration authorities. In almost every one of the stories, they ended up getting away with some illegal activity (mainly the possession of drugs or smuggling of tobacco). Two stories, one from the Project Manager and the other from the WWOOFer previously mentioned, were about their sense of being targeted because they had "dreadlocks" at the time and how unfair it was to be profiled (again, they are both white). During these stories, I listened quietly and with a sardonic moment of self-awareness realized that neither I nor my work belonged in this space.

Not that anyone in the circle cared to ask me as a Black person raised in the United States, but I myself have experienced run-ins with the police that have ended quite without humor. As just one example: despite being a lifelong European Union passport holder, at the age of 13 I was stopped, and strip searched (top-half only), at the Swiss border while flying from the United States to Germany. They explained that I "could have had a bomb." To her credit, the female border guard examining my newly budding breasts for the apparent explosives they could contain at least had the sense to look a bit embarrassed by her task.

The same two people who had previously been speaking around the fire also complained about having their "dreadlocks" searched by transportation authorities when going through security at airports. They didn't seem to have any self-awareness about what it must be like for Black people, for Black women like me, to endure the probing—albeit gloved—hands of a white person examining my hair against my will. This is against the backdrop of ancestral trauma I hold regarding the manipulation of Black bodies by white hands. In 2017, scientists were able to prove[4] through studying nematode worms what those of us who come from traditions of ancestor kinship have always known—that memories and experiences of our ancestors remain with us for generations (according to the study, adult animals hold an estimated 14 generations of memory in our DNA).

As my maternal ancestors were enslaved in the West Indies (Jamaica and Barbados, to be exact) as recently as the early 1800s (between five and seven generations ago), I understand why every time my hair and body are searched and roughly handled against my will, I feel a sense of shame, rage, helplessness, and fear that my white counterparts do not. Those memories of being on the auction block, with white buyers perhaps opening the jaws of my ancestors to examine their teeth and probe their bodies for the fitness of labor in the sugarcane fields, remain with me.

The day after this campfire conversation was when I texted the Project Manager letting him know that this project was not a fit for me and that I would be leaving the following Saturday. To be sure, this was far from the first issue I experienced there. The day of the fire I was enduring day two of being uncomfortably iced out by some workers due to a miscommunication about the leeway granted to me by the Project Manager to determine the course of my own workdays while I drafted a creative sociocultural project for implementation with local women. Rather than directly communicate with me and clarify the schedule, a lead partner in the project and a field worker chose to gossip about me behind my back, with one making a snide comment to me about how I must have "rested well" while she was in the field.

Additionally, there was a moment during lunch one or two weeks prior to these events when I heard some employees from Poland using the G-word (which in the United States and Western Europe is well-known by members of the Roma and Sinti community to be a harmful slur), and making jokes such as "We should get us some G-----s!" Rather than have a "social justice warrior moment," where I shamed the employees, I simply chose to change the flow of the conversation by remarking on how rich and

Natascha Gass @natgass

beautiful I felt the Roma and Sinti cultures are, very pointedly not using the G-word, and sharing my experience of attending some beautiful events hosted by the Roma and Sinti community during the Roma Future Week in Berlin in 2022. To their credit, other employees—also clearly uncomfortable with the tone of the previous comments but unsure of what to say—joined in this redirection of the conversation, with one worker from Spain expressing her dismay about the racism shown to her son's Roma classmates by non-Roma parents.

Some of you may be reading, thinking, *Now what does this have to do with community?* Or perhaps even, *What a bummer!*

Herein lies my point.

The withdrawal from the world I have noticed in the formation of mostly white-populated ecological projects and communities enables white members to fully retreat from difficult topics.[5] In her work "Comforting Discomfort as Complicity: White Fragility and the Pursuit of Invulnerability" (2017), scholar Barbara Applebaum coins the feeling certain white people are aiming to avoid by refusing to discuss truths which would invite self-reflection as "white discomfort."

The arrival of persons of color, like me, who are critical of, say, why white persons are wearing culturally sacred hairstyles like dreadlocks, who ask whether people know that the mass-produced fabric pattern they are wearing is the cultural legacy of the Diné people, or who highlight the inappropriateness of speaking about Roma and Sinti people in a way which is derogatory, is then seen as a *bummer*. Disruptive. Antagonistic. Fractious. Unwanted. We are told, perhaps, as I was by the Project Manager, that "there were never any problems on the team until now," or that we are being intimidating. Our illumination of the problems then becomes the problem—that is to say, *we* become the problem.[6]

To be fair, these people were all the festival-going, pattern-wearing, earth-loving, recycling, food-growing, anti-factory farm enthusiasts who populate many communities, perhaps even communities like yours. They worked hard, removing invasive species on a mountainside all day and tending the earth in a myriad of ways.

And yet.

I cannot help myself from looking around these more isolated communities and thinking about the conversations which have never happened before without the presence of people of color. As one project member informed me, when revealing previous conflicts which happened at the site: "It seems like anyone who challenges them is forced to leave." I began to wonder whether community, in this form, is a shield for avoiding self-critique or engaging with the realities of ongoing global racial justice and decolonizing movements.

Given the definition of difficult knowledge, I propose that we, as people of color, are the tangible embodiment of difficult knowledge in majority or all-white spaces. As a BIPOC person, the realities of my lived life and those of my ancestors—which despite the burdens of intersectional oppression and white supremacy are rich and vibrant—are the "unsettling truths" which certain groups, up until this point, have managed to avoid. Especially those communities on a "save the planet" trip and caught in polarities of needing to be the "good guys," these are truths which may challenge their sense of self as individuals and the entire stated mission of their community. For those who wish to avoid engaging with the enduring legacies of slavery, land theft from Indigenous and Black populations, or the myriad examples of colonialism from across the globe, our presence and the knowledge we carry is indeed haunting.

I began to wonder whether community, in this form, is a shield for avoiding self-critique or engaging with the realities of ongoing global racial justice and decolonizing movements.

Chris Roth

This is not to say that communities populated primarily or solely by persons of color are perfect. I myself am currently developing an intentional community vision solely for Queer and BIPOC folx, and I am well-aware that we will have constant and necessary processes of sitting with discomfort: the discomfort that comes with engaging colorism, citizenship status, class, internalized homophobia and transphobia, and the work of decolonizing ourselves so that we can effectively live together in community. So that we can survive a world which does not want us, and then begin to thrive.


Chris Roth

The difference, however, is that we as people of color must face these issues at every moment for our own survival—the assurance of which for many of us is the focal point of forming communities in the first place. Unlike non-BIPOC people, there is only so far we can run from the world, which is why so many of our communities focus on political engagement—frequently through the provision of life-giving services for BIPOC folx which we have historically been denied, like affordable housing and access to healthy food.[7]

Although my experience at the project in Portugal filled me with a sense of despair, unease, and isolation, even leading me one day to tearfully weep on the phone to an old friend from the comfort of my camper van, it did affirm to me the importance of the vision I am holding: a vision of a project built for and by Queer BIPOC folx, where we can be present with the unsettling knowledge we each embody and challenge one another in the long road towards justice.

In July 2024 (two months from the time of writing this piece) I will head to an off-grid intentional community in the United Kingdom; this time, however, I made sure to ask in the initial contact how many BIPOC people are in residence and stipulated that I would only attend if there was at least one other BIPOC person there. The person communicating from the space was very clear in their response and understood why I asked; a white person, they informed me that there is one other BIPOC person in residence but the space is majority white, that they have much work to do around race, and that they would understand if I withdrew from the event because of this. It was the perfect response. My parting word for majority white spaces is to be similarly self-reflective, forthright, and empathetic about their ability (or lack thereof) to safely host our embodied presences and the knowledge we bring. ❧

Jahia LaSangoma (she/her) is a land-based "artivist," writer, and scholar with roots in Berlin. She grew up in the United States, which is where she first encountered the world of intentional communities. She creates discussion and engagement about decolonization and spiritualism through public-facing content such as book chapters, performance pieces, research, visual art, and educational events. To connect, visit linktr.ee/lasangoma.

---

1. Difficult Knowledge (noun) ~ "Difficult knowledge is a knowing that poses emotional and epistemological challenges to the individual or collective because of its connection to violence and atrocity. Difficult knowledge is embodied knowledge, a felt theory or way of being in the world that is rooted in traumatic experiences or unsettling truths, and that poses challenges of communicability and representation. It is often highly contested, silenced or institutionally erased. It is also haunting, a violent past that persists and insists on justice." (Source: University of British Columbia Vancouver Blog for the course *Difficult Knowledge: The Ethics & Praxis of Research in Challenging Settings*.)

2. You can read more about the Maroons on the UNESCO World Heritage Site for the Blue Mountains in Jamaica (whc.unesco.org/en/list/1356) or by reading online the open-access scholarship "Maroon Socioterritorial Movements" by Ana Laura Zavala Guillen.

3. The deep cultural connections of Blackness and hair include the tradition of moods, marriage status, and ethnic affiliation among various African tribes being expressed through braiding styles–perhaps just one reason white slaveowners and slave traders forcibly shaved the heads of enslaved African men and generally forced enslaved African women to keep their hair covered. If you are a non-Black person confused about the importance of hair and hairstyles to Black cultural legacy, I invite you to watch John Oliver's "Hair" episode of the online show *Last Week Tonight*, available on YouTube.

4. Klosin, et. al., "Transgenerational transmission of environmental information in *C. elegans.*" *Science* magazine, 2017 (science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aah6412).

5. Consider that in 2013, the research institute PRRI found that 75 percent of white Americans reported having no non-white friends. The original 2013 story was also reported in *The Washington Post, The Atlantic,* Yahoo News, and elsewhere. When they did follow-up research in 2022, PRRI found that 67 percent of white Americans still had no non-white friends. And overall, averaged among all respondents, friendship networks of white Americans were 90 percent white in 2022–just a one percentage drop from 91 percent in 2013 (May 24, 2022, prri.org, "PRRI Survey: Friendship Networks of White Americans Continue to Be 90% White").

6. Scholar and activist W. E. B. Du Bois asked the question "How does it feel to be the problem?," in his 1903 book, *The Souls of Black Folk.*

7. For more information on the realities of food apartheid in the United States and how it has inspired Black and Native American communities to seek alternative solutions, you can refer to the following resources: the 2018 book *Farming While Black* by Leah Penniman; the 2019 "Indigenous Food Sovereignty in the United States" report by Devon A. Mihesuah and Elizabeth Hoover; the 2017 research article, "We Can't Grow Food on All This Concrete" by Russell Rickford; or my own research from 2022 on the topic entitled, "Held by the Earth: How Black & Native Food/Land Activists in the US Can Find Common Ground."

The Great Schism

By O.W.G.

I am a quite old white person, not quite as old as dirt, but certainly gravel would not be far off. I have been affiliated with and supported communities for most of my adult life, lived and worked in one for over seven years, and ending up overseeing most of the administrative tasks during my time there.

What I see now in the community close to my home, one that I have supported over the years, is troubling to me. One might assume from evidence that anyone who wishes to be there is going to more than likely hold very progressive views; certainly not a sin when in balance. That is established quite early on in the interview process by asking candidates their preferred pronouns right off, and then seguing into questions about degree of empathy for marginalized people, about groups or activities that they like and support, and queries revealing moderate or right-wing political views. Although there is not a strident rejection of alternative viewpoints, the results confirm the intent. So the process itself is by nature non-inclusive, and nudges many towards the exit right away.

It is one thing to desire diversity, another to accept diversity of thought. Hate should not be accepted by any group, but there are many, many fine people who do not hoist the progressive flag as highly as others, and they might find a place in community, provide value there, if they felt more welcomed. Yet at my local community, persons exploring residency there who do not toe a left line, though not summarily dismissed, tend to leave soon, and their talents go with them.

Here is another aspect to all of this, one that may prove controversial: Marginalized persons, persons identifying as such, can be drawn to places where members do not simply support their issues, but are quick to embrace victim narratives that can seem quite surreal to others. However one relates to that, it clearly creates a community where dialog about the same, minute examination of behaviors by others towards the aggrieved, can rapidly take front and center. It is a case of the tail wagging the dog, and the effective management, fiscal and otherwise, that communities so desperately need, suffers.

Fantasy can take the place of competencies, and the labor essential to the grooming and maintenance of property can become either absent or deflected. Descriptors such as healing, magic, joyous ecological earthcare, etc. speak to severe reality dissociation; they stand in for the grounding of the actual experiences of being on site, and obfuscate the true needs of the facility. Residents may lack fiscal stability and prior access to experiences that have led to a greater familiarity with the wider stage of a world where we all must find personal purchase and functional responsibility. Moreover, psychological issues, often profound ones, may also have an out-of-balance and negative impact upon communities.

All of this can lead to the "last house at the end of the road" syndrome, and the least effectual people, with the least choices at hand, extend their tenancy, and may make life uncomfortable or impossible for others. Of course the reasons for that are far from that simplistic, but in aggregate it is all quite challenging. None of this implies that good people do not seek community life; it has great advantages should all the gears mesh correctly, but overall stress engendered by persistent and abrasive conflict is a major reason for community instability. That I have seen over and over again.

Just prior to my leaving my former community I had written an email stating that the community might consider stepping it up with challenging persons who were degrading the ability of the place to function. I received an email reply saying "that's right" or words to that effect and then a couple more categorizing and identifying my alleged transgression: "insensitive and harmful"; "marginalized people deserve community"; seeing people as "less than."

Is any of that true? Maybe. It did not seem so to me at the time, and still does not, but I don't want to feel about that, or respond to it, in ways that just exacerbate those kinds of heightened ideational conflicts. For me it's just over.

So where is the line between kindness, acceptance, encompassing diversity, and the emotional milieus that invite aggressive and unappeased victims to arrive and remain in community? That is a huge question, and one I find not asked too directly due to the anxieties inherent in the asking. For me it was better just to bow out, and I have no doubts that given the circumstances on site they are better off without me. I'm not as sure that this is as true for the place itself, the lands and structures that desperately need care and feeding.

The writer Camus said, "nothing is true which forces one to exclude." That truism goes all the way around, and I want to listen to those who feel genuinely excluded in ways that can be rationally understood, and not intentionally or unintentionally designed to continue into perpetuity. It is the bandwagon that I reject, the getting on with current oppression and grievances that seem to exist in a foggy netherworld that I cannot access or grasp.

Of course the blame may fall upon me, my age or gender or race or "privilege" and all of that veiling what may be obvious to others, what may be easy for them to understand and support. Youth and age, the more left-leaning learning proffered to the young, are all part of the entangled dynamics fueling political and emotional divides.

In all fairness, education, particularly in the lower grades, was always about conditioning; always partly what to think rather than how. For me it was about patriotism, learning in school all of the theme songs and anthems of each military branch, being encouraged to wear our father's military hats and medals to school. Now of course it is the other side of the pendulum, and if there is any real difference between now and then, it is the dominance of progressive indoctrination at the higher levels of education. Regardless, free and uncluttered thinking and apprehending, unconditioned minds, new ideas presented without manipulation, and the idea of helping the young find what they love to do, have never been job one.

So there is the possibility in community of opening up to free dialogue, true diversity, and that may help. But we are the world and the ideational and political challenges within community are simply a mirror of that. Then there is the human factor. It is not in our nature, regardless of race, income, sexual orientation, religion, to willingly surrender power and the privileges that accompany it, and that perspective can be applied to both sides of the political spectrum.

So, for instance, who gets to decide when there is enough equity, inclusion, diversity, fairness? And will that question in itself create an entirely new conflict within communities, within the world, going forward? Or how is one, for instance, to understand the role of microaggressions within the scope of grievances when they are so difficult for many of us to get a palpable and rational read on? Is the flaw within ourselves, or rather within the substance of the presentation of the offense, or both? Is it a given that insults or misguided comments will be carried forward as an unhealed wound to be bared, symbolic of all degrees of injustices over all times?

I have heard in dialogue between white and black persons that the latter "carry a wound." I believe that, and I also know, without denigrating the experiences of people of color, that I have never met anyone who did not. Forgiveness for injustices, putting aside skin color, is a personal matter, but might we find some unity by entertaining the notion that "the wound is where the light enters," or come to understand that the people most often given the power and the words to heal are themselves afflicted and have gifts arising from the knowing of that state intimately? I'm not totally biased against blame or the demand for accountability for social ills, but there are other ways to deal with our inner emotional worlds.

The breadth of acceptable dialogue is so very narrow—so much so that the risk of "eating our own" seems an inopportune eventuality at both ends of political divide.

The meeting that needs to happen is heart to heart, the place where the "holiness of the heart's affections" comes into play. But the current divide seems to have created a rift of distancing that seems not to permit that. Anger, resentments, and power are the chips most often put on the table, and ears and minds close at a whiff of anyone out of step.

We carry such vehemence about injustices we visit upon one another, but in the main do not seem to carry that over to the considerably more grievous assaults that we have all visited upon creation. We are quite young in geologic time, the terrible twos a good guess, and many of our puerile actions might be explained within that context. The simple act of getting on an airplane is destructive, and every day is filled with our sins against nature, but we absolve ourselves of all of it by saying that no drop of rain is the flood, or by simply not thinking about it.

We live in a culture that makes villains of us all, conditions us to be misfits, forces us into a circuitous state of cognitive dissonance (as in the habit of adoration for an invisible God, and then putting to flame his/her visible creation), and fuels the endless desire for experience. We all need to be forgiven; no one is innocent, the best living in a state of penitence while spinning on the hamster wheel.

This is the place at present where we actually find ourselves most fully gathered, most in accord by virtue of our beliefs and actions about what the good life is, and what irreverent demands we need to make upon all living things in order to get there. The idea of justice that we hold includes the intention that everyone can join the party, and leave their detritus behind along with ours. It is a debasing culture, and the loss of the sense of the sacred inherent within it risks making zombies of us all. The erosion of soul and of soul making underpins all of our ills.

At the community where I lived, I met a Quaker artist and writer named Dorothea Blom. She has long passed but rare is the day when I do not think of her. Here is one of her aphorisms: "I choose to participate in the world being born, whether or not it arrives safely." I wonder if there is an amen there that we might all say; I wonder if we might find something generative and holy within ourselves, whether born of experience or intuition, so irrefutably true that we might all embrace it together?

The greatest gifts of our humanity: the apprehension of beauty, the flowering of the imagination, the possibility of continual evolution and creation continuing within. Westerners in particular have cultivated such an obsessive outward focus that interiority is left largely unexplored. More's the pity.

O.W.G. (a pseudonym) has lived in community and worked for the ideals and goals of community living but does not wish to be further identified. Some specific details and anecdotes included in the original version of this article have also been omitted in the interests of protecting the identity of the author's former community.

Chris Roth

Tricky Issues with BIPOC and Well-Meaning White Community Members

By Diana Leafe Christian

Editor's Note: *With O.W.G.'s permission, we solicited responses to his article "The Great Schism" from several regular* Communities *contributors. Those are interspersed among the next four pieces in this issue, starting with this one by Diana Leafe Christian. The final response, by Crystal Byrd Farmer, adds reflections on "Wounded Healers Together—or Not" by Shannon Kelly, also with Shannon's permission.*

I believe O.W.G. is trying to convey something meaningful and painful to him which he believes is an important issue for communities. But, perhaps because he fears being criticized, he writes obliquely and philosophically and I wasn't quite sure what he meant.

While what O.W.G. wrote may be like a Rorschach inkblot test anyone could project onto, I wondered whether he was trying to describe the following increasingly common kind of community interaction:

(1) A white community member speaks up about something they perceive as unfair in their group regarding the actions of a BIPOC community member.

(2) One or more other white community members accurately or inaccurately assume the white person was being insensitive to and committed microaggressions toward the BIPOC member and perhaps even displayed overt racism.

(3) Feeling appalled, and wanting to protect and support the BIPOC member, the other perhaps overzealous members criticize, reprimand, or even fiercely condemn the first white person for asking about or trying to address the issue in their community they thought might be unfair.

(4) The first white person feels hurt and believes their actions and intentions have been misunderstood and they've been unfairly accused. Not only that, the community issue they tried to bring up continues on, remaining unaddressed.

(5) Now the first white person is upset by what seems like *three* unfair things:

- the perceived unfairness in the community which they tried to address,
- how they believe they've now been unfairly accused for bringing it up, and
- the unfairness they tried to call attention to continues on and no one else wants to touch it.

The person may withdraw from community meetings and social gatherings or leave the community altogether, as O.W.G. did.

Ouch! Sometimes white community members absolutely do say or do clueless things that discourage and exhaust BIPOC members. Other community members are of course right to point this out, educating the white person about what they said or did that was insensitive, a microaggression, or overtly racist, and strongly encourage them to change their attitudes and not do this again.

At the same time I know white community members can treat a BIPOC member just as they would treat another community member and call attention to words or actions that don't seem right. They can ask a question about fairness in the community re the BIPOC people as O.W.G. apparently did, if I understood him correctly. Or they can ask the BIPOC people to step up and meet their community obligations

Maybe the white community member *is* committing microagressions or being racist. Or, maybe they're just acting like a normal community member interacting with other community members.


Ospan Ali


Nathan Dumlao


Sander Sammy


Sherise Van Dyk

if they aren't doing them, for example. Or they can remind them to follow community agreements they may be violating, if that's what they're doing—about, say, parking, pets, children, quiet hours, meeting behavior, and so on—just as communitarians commonly remind each other about the group's agreements and help each other stay accountable to them.

But a white person doing this re a BIPOC person in the community can be risky, can't it? The community in general, or the BIPOC member, might respond with appreciation for raising the issue. Or, the community in general or BIPOC person may be upset and react angrily or defensively. Or they could accuse the person of committing microaggressions or being racist. And maybe the white community member *is* doing that. Or, maybe they're just acting like a normal community member interacting with other community members.

At this point other white community members may leap to the defense of the BIPOC person, assuming—sometimes correctly, sometimes not—that he or she has been wronged yet again and castigate the white member who spoke up. The whole issue is tricky because even white progressive Leftist communitarians *can* unconsciously be racist and make obvious blunders that are hurtful and exhausting to BIPOC members. And this can happen over and over, wearing the BIPOC member down and driving them out of the community.

Similarly, BIPOC people, like white people, can screw up and not fulfill their community obligations and/or they can violate its agreements. Or they can have challenging behaviors, as O.W.G. notes. And when someone white tries to address this, they can be incorrectly accused of racist behavior, made worse by well-meaning other white people who—feeling uncomfortable perhaps? feeling guilty perhaps?—can heap further accusations on the first person. This can also happen so often it wears down the white person, and it can also drive them out of the community. Were the other white people staunchly standing up for racial equity? Or were they projecting their own trauma issues on the person who spoke up? Or taking on the "Rescuer" role in the Karpman Drama Triangle? (See "Working Effectively with Especially Challenging Behaviors, Part Eight," COMMUNITIES #203, Summer 2024.)

If I understood O.W.G.'s point correctly, or even if not, this is a topic I believe communities should address. I think communication misunderstandings like these can and do occur in communities, and are well worth considering, acknowledging, and finding effective solutions for. One approach might be:

(1) Hold clear, well-facilitated community conversations about the topic and welcome all input, informational as well as emotional.

(2) Learn as much as we can about unearned privilege, microaggressions, and racial inequities, currently and historically.

(3) Practice super-effective, clear, and connecting (as compared to alienating) communication skills.

(4) Be crystal clear about community agreements and have clear consequences for violating agreements (perhaps that's what O.W.G. was referring to). And

(5) Have as clear, thorough, and rigorous an incoming-member process as we can, so we attract responsible, emotionally healthy new members, BIPOC and white, and deflect away those with apparently challenging behaviors who might trigger more community conflict. (See "A Graduated Series of Consequences and 'The Community Eye,'" COMMUNITIES #184, Fall 2019.)

I believe that as the communities movement continues growing, with increasing numbers of people joining communities and starting new ones, more and more will be multiracial and multicultural and more communities of color will be established. As we stumble along this steep learning curve, let's welcome this future with greater awareness of racial injustice historically and of our own stuck issues and blind spots, and develop considerably more kindness, compassion, and grace. ❧

Diana Leafe Christian is author of Creating a Life Together, *and of the eight-part* COMMUNITIES *series "Working Effectively with Especially Challenging Behaviors."*

Challenges in Inclusivity

By Laird Schaub

O.W.G. has written an article that's elicited in me a number of thoughts as an experienced communitarian (40 years) and professional community consultant (37 years). Here are highlights of my ruminations, in no particular order:

I. The Pot Calling Out the Kettle

O.W.G. wrote: *Descriptors such as healing, magic, joyous ecological earthcare, etc. speak to severe reality dissociation.* Ouch. To me this seems extremely dismissive of what for others may be a core spiritual experience and framework, part of what gives meaning to their world. And yet O.W.G. has no hesitation promoting their own spiritual interpretation of the world, as if it is **the** reality: *The erosion of soul and of soul making underpins all of our ills… I wonder if we might find something generative and holy within ourselves, whether born of experience or intuition, so irrefutably true that we might all embrace it together?*

Huh? For someone lamenting the lack of tolerance in communities for viewpoints other than their own, I have a hard time reconciling O.W.G.'s disdain for spiritual beliefs that differ from his. The hypocrisy here seems painfully acute.

II. Left-Leaning Orthodoxy

That said, I believe O.W.G. makes a valid point about intentional communities being bastions of liberal politics, where conservative viewpoints are generally met with knee-jerk disdain. The tender spot here is that communities preach tolerance and a commitment to diversity and inclusivity, but do they walk their talk when it comes to political discourse?

In contrast, it's my sense that the dominant culture among Republicans today tends to be cleaner in their intolerance, as they make no attempt to try to bring folks together—they just want to win and hold power. And with Tr*mp driving the bus, it appears to matter less and less who they run over en route to their destination [*see the accompanying sidebar for more commentary at the national level*].

There are, I suppose, two divergent approaches to building a more harmonious society: a) learn to work compassionately with the views of all—such that no one feels excluded or discounted; or b) keep voting off the island everyone who disagrees with you, or is unacceptably different.

Orthodoxy of any stripe (the promulgation of "correct thinking" and denigration of those who stray from the party line) is the bane of inclusivity, and I think there is a case to be made that many intentional communities have adopted a culture that embraces a version of the same close-mindedness they decry.

Can the prospective member see things from the perspective of others? How accurately do they listen? Can they work constructively with critical feedback about their behavior as a member of the group?

III. The Political as Personal

I have experienced versions of this dilemma in my own family. I have a sister who converted to Mormonism in her 20s. In the understandable enthusiasm for her newfound spiritual path, she went through a phase of trying to "save" the rest of the family, until the rest of us had had enough, and were able to tell her point blank that she was going to have to choose between her unsolicited proselytizing or having a relationship with her family. To her credit, she backed off. While she continues happily as a Mormon today (and it's hard for her to be around the social drinking at family gatherings), she has accepted that her rapture is not ours, and we've been able to recapture and sustain meaningful relationship. Bully for her.

Closer to home, my son is a libertarian, who is far less comfortable with government regulation than I am. He went to college at Amherst (1999-2003) and lamented the lack of openness among his fellow students for views outside a rather narrow range of neo-liberalism. While the predominant leftist thinking at Amherst (among students and faculty alike) didn't bother me, because I agreed with it, I could see his point—which I believe is the essential one being made by O.W.G.

IV. The Community Dance

The primary challenge of cooperative groups committed to inclusivity is how to accurately see the ways in which other group members are different, and that's OK—even a strength, as it affords additional perspective when wrestling with issues. (*How did they come to have a different view; what are they seeing that I may be missing or undervaluing?*)

How can we disagree about how to view and respond to issues when the stakes are high, and reliably have that exploration bring us closer together? That's where the money is—not in learning how to more effectively undercut (or expose the mendacity of) those who think and act differently from us. Obviously, this is all the more challenging to accomplish when those with opposing views are vilifying you, or are in denial about what they've done, but it's possible.

Photos by Chris Roth

V. Nuances in Inclusivity

Over the years I have come to the view that a commitment to inclusivity is more nuanced than I originally thought. While I believe that all humans are inherently social animals who crave others' company and desire acceptance in the herd, that does not mean that everyone is well-suited to group living.

In recognition of that, I believe intentional communities are better off being selective about members, and clear about the rights and responsibilities of membership. It *has* to be a more sophisticated than "Did the check clear?"

Baseline screens include alignment with stated community values, and a willingness to abide by community agreements extant. Yet there is a more subtle level of this, which I style essential social skills. Can the prospective member see things from the perspective of others? How accurately do they listen? Can they work constructively with critical feedback about their behavior as a member of the group? Have they done personal work to understand the ways in which their life has been privileged, or are they open to that examination? Are they able to take responsibility for missteps, and make a good faith effort to correct unacceptable behavior? In my experience, attempting community with people who score poorly on these questions has shown them to be highly predictive of whether that member will be experienced as an asset, or as an ass. ❧

Laird Schaub cofounded Sandhill Farm, a small, income-sharing community in northeast Missouri, in 1974, and lived there for 39 years. A process consultant since 1987, he moved to Duluth, Minnesota in 2016, where he lives today with his partner, Susan, and continues his work as a cooperative group consultant and teacher. Find his blog at communityandconsensus.blogspot.com.

The Macro Level

To my thinking, the danger of Tr*mpism is not so much the espousal of extreme views, as it is the apparent inability or unwillingness to consider the views or choices of others as having any value. It's not about finding broad-based solutions; it's about imposing one subgroup's will on others, by any means possible.

To be sure, there are initiatives here and there that attempt to bridge the widening gulf between the two (praise be), yet note how both recent Democratic presidents have been characterized as weak because they attempted while in office to find support for legislative initiatives that bridged across the aisle, and studiously eschewed divisive language—in the face of incredible provocation. In contrast, Tr*mp doesn't build bridges; he burns them—and there is no apparent lack of people willing to supply the accelerant or bring hot dogs to the conflagration.

While intentional communities rarely engage in incendiary rhetoric, they are nonetheless frequently closed to laboring with conservative views—and that's worth laboring with.

—LS

Nuances in Working with Inclusivity

- Systemic oppression (writing off, denigrating, or limiting the opportunities for a class of people) is different from not wanting to live with an individual because they have limited capacity or inclination to cooperate. Don't conflate the two!

- Lacking intentionality about the culture you create, communities tend to fall into the default of creating systems and styles that are comfortable for the founders—not realizing that they may be inadvertently stacking the deck against people with different backgrounds, communication styles, or ways of viewing the world.

- It is insufficient to wash your hands of the issues of inequality if you are benefiting from the status quo, claiming as a defense that you never intended inequality. Good intentions do not give one a free pass from responsibility for deleterious impact.

—LS

Key Hazards on the Road to Inclusivity

• Unpacking Diversity

Is there a commitment to understanding the many faces of diversity, and the myriad ways that members have enjoyed the benefits of privilege in a world that systematically oppresses many classes of people? Is there a willingness to do the hard work of trying to suss out the best ways to level the playing field, so that you're breathing life into a commitment to welcoming the voices of all members? (*Hint:* It is insufficient to simply state that intent.)

• The Limits of Diversity

After living in community for four decades and working professionally with cooperative groups for more than 35, it's clear to me that communities struggle to set limits on acceptable behavior, and to hold people accountable when they fall short of meeting minimum expectations. Few want to be the membership police—tough love is not what they came to community to experience or mete out. And yet, it can be excruciating watching groups struggle with dysfunctional and obstinate members—even to the point of losing good members over the failure to resolve the tension, and creating a brittle atmosphere that is not attractive to replacements. So the question is: can the group deal bravely yet compassionately with the perception that it may be at the limit of the amount of diversity it can digest and work with well?

• Being Intentional about What Kinds of Diversity the Group Commits to

O.W.G. expresses impatience and frustration with what he perceives as intolerance in the communities in which he's lived. Fair enough. I don't suppose I've ever seen a community that doesn't have blind spots, or that pleases everyone. At the same time, it sounds to me that those communities were making a commitment (conscious or otherwise) to supporting marginalized people, and O.W.G. lamented that groups making that choice were failing to get basic maintenance and functionality met—because they'd gone overboard in pouring precious resources into supporting the injured, oppressed, and dysfunctional.

Even assuming that's true (who knows?) isn't that a legitimate diversity commitment? While I don't know how consciously that choice was made, what a group ultimately stands for is essentially showcased by what they do; not by what they say they'll do.

That choice didn't make sense to O.W.G., and he voted with his feet—which is his right, but that doesn't necessarily mean it was wrong for the group.

As I see it, the problem, if there is one, is whether communities are aware that a) they cannot be all things to all people, and must make choices about what kinds of diversity they want to address; and b) they own what they are not doing, or perhaps may be blind to.

• Appreciating the Distinction Between Clarity and Tolerance

In the interest of opening the door to a wider range of potential viewpoints, I recommend that instead of weakening your commitment to common values, you increase your tolerance for deviation from the ideal. Thus, you may be able to work constructively and creatively with people who prefer brick red over rose pink, while still insisting that there be no green.

The litmus test here is: can you envision a bridge to each person's core interests? What spans are too far to bridge, *for your group?* At Sandhill Farm, for example, we had a wide tolerance when it came to members' diets, yet if a prospective member advocated for chemical farming to increase yields, our response was "Hit the road, Jack."

• Understanding the Inevitability of Conflict in Community

There is a common naiveté among new communities where members dream of a harmonious life together (free from the strife of mainstream culture) based on rallying around a set of common values. They are rudely awakened to the reality that well-intentioned members can interpret values differently, and there is a great deal more occasion for friction in community, where you live more closely with neighbors and share management of joint assets.

People overwhelmingly have been raised in a competitive, adversarial mainstream culture, and they bring that conditioning with them into the community experiment. Thus, we tend to fight when we encounter disagreement and the stakes are high—rather than get curious about why another member sees the same situation differently, and be open to the possibility that you can learn something by listening to their thinking and experience.

Unlearning competitive conditioning requires personal work. While it isn't necessarily easy letting go of what helped you succeed in the mainstream, if you don't make the effort, you are predictably going to be frustrated a good deal of the time and no fun to be around.

—LS

Wounded Healers Together—or Not

By Shannon Kelly

***Note:** Names (including the author's) and identifying details have been changed throughout this story.*

"So, what do you think?"

I gazed over our favorite spot at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, considering how to respond. My friend Alison had just complained for half an hour about her boyfriend, and while his actions were egregious, that wasn't the whole story. A tricolored heron swooped in, joining a flock of snowy egret, black-crowned night-heron, glossy ibis, and others. Perhaps the community of nature inspired me to be bold.

"Do you want to know what I actually think?" I asked doubtfully.

"Yes, of course!" she emphatically responded.

"I think you have some distress activated, and you should focus on your own healing work."

"Thank you! I needed that!" She hugged me, and we continued our walk hand in hand.

Although we didn't know it at the time, this moment cemented our lifelong commitment to each other—a friendship characterized by radical honesty coupled with compassionate support. Alison is a social worker and therapist; I am a naturalist and peer counselor. We both are wounded healers: people with histories of abuse and trauma, who experience empowerment in helping others find a healing path akin to the ones that proved so vital to our own eventual thriving.

In the best wounded healer partnerships, trust for each other allows us to pause when our friend alerts us that we are acting out our trauma. We can accept the invitation to turn inward towards our own healing, and allow ourselves to be soothed by reminders that we are safer now. This mutual accountability (coupled with love) can create an extremely fulfilling relationship where we know we are accepted, in spite of everything.

Critical Race Theory does not ask, "Is racist behavior present in this interaction?" Rather, CRT says, "Racism IS occurring here."

• • •

But sometimes a relationship that seems to promise this safety turns sour.

For eight years I did a wounded healer dance with another friend, Bev. We loved that same spot at Jamaica Bay, visiting it multiple times over the years on weekend getaways from my home community, where she was first a frequent visitor, then a renter. The place seemed to inspire the courage to be honest in Bev, too. She reminded me that my broth-

er was worth loving, even after several years of estrangement. When she fled from an abusive situation, I invited her to live with me rent-free. She helped me focus on my own healing when I was triggered by a coworker. I assisted her as she struggled with some difficult dynamics in her parenting.

During a community workshop on ending racism, I suggested to Bev that she may want to join the people of the global majority and indigenous (PGMI) group for the break-out sessions. She was shocked, because she had always thought of herself as white. Her family said they were white! And especially as an adult, she appeared to most people as white—any small hint of being "of color" had faded as she matured.

She learned more about her family history, and discovered some of her ancestors had African heritage. She identified experiences from childhood that could be classified as racism, specifically some instances of classmates assuming that she was a Cuban or Mexican migrant farmworker's daughter.

I was proud of my friend for helping integrate her multigenerational family trauma. It seemed similar to my own healing. The majority of my ancestors are Irish, and came to the US during the Potato Famine. This historical event is considered by some to be a genocide perpetrated by the English colonizers of Ireland, who used a natural crop disease as an opportunity to "civilize" the Irish and make them work for money (be exploited) instead of continuing their traditional agrarian lifestyle. English landlords exported food out of Ireland during the famine. One fifth of Irish people died, and one fourth fled Ireland to avoid dying. When they came to the US, they encountered signs in shop windows saying, "No dogs or Irish allowed."

Educating myself about this history helped me understand the multigenerational family trauma that I inherited. It also helped me take more responsibility for my positioning as a white person in the US. If you've given up your language, your culture, your religion, your connection with ancestral land in order to assimilate into "whiteness" and survive, you might feel empty inside. You might be liable to strike out at others, desperately grasping for advantage. You might feel contempt towards immigrants, particularly those who are not "white enough" to assimilate. You have lost much of what forms the foundation of a whole human being, and replaced it with an empty promise of privilege gained through harming others.

We can thank our ancestors for helping our families persist. Nobody makes this Faustian bargain without the pressure of intense survival-level risks. Our lives are proof that they succeeded in bringing us into a better situation. Thanks to their sacrifices, we are now safe enough to integrate the trauma and make different choices. I thought my friend was doing a similar process of healing family wounds in order to find compassion and integration for the parts of her psychology that were oriented toward domination, a remnant of those survival-level struggles.

• • •

Soon, however, Bev started avidly reading books from Critical Social Justice (CSJ) perspectives. Instead of taking more responsibility for her own behavior, she started "calling out" other people's behavior. She told her friends we needed to work on our white fragility. She accused a community member of racism when he made an innocent comment, specifically, "It's fun to learn a new language," when he heard she was going to a French class. (Because French was the language of her family branch that also had some African roots, this was, she told us, a racist thing to say.)

I didn't think much about this trend until later, when I was trying to understand what factors contributed to the heartbreaking loss of a nearly decade-long friendship. On their own, these moments could be just the normal missteps people make when they are integrating new information about themselves and feel hypersensitive to a pattern they previously hadn't recognized in their lives. But Bev had jumped on the train of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and other Critical Social Justice theories, postmodern-inspired activism that teaches people that power dynamics are the most important aspect of every interaction.

Importantly, Critical Race Theory does not ask, "Is racist behavior present in this interaction?" Rather, CRT says, "Racism IS occurring in this (and every) situation; how can we uncover it and make it visible to others and hold the perpetrators accountable?" This cynical perspective encourages people to go into every interaction with a chip on their shoulders. Its adherents see people as agents of oppression, not as basically good, albeit imperfect human beings.

Though now a frequent topic of the Culture Wars, at the time, I didn't know anything about CRT. But I was becoming concerned about Bev's well-being. I decided it was time to have a radical-honesty "wounded healers together" moment. I invited her to that same spot at Jamaica Bay we'd visited often before, where the wading birds had helped us wade into and clarify various issues in our lives.

We spent some time gazing out over the natural avian diversity in that beautiful place. I refocused and gathered my courage, determined to share with her how her behavior had been affecting me. I told her:

"I'm glad you are working on the ways you have been targeted by racism. But I'm concerned that you are letting a sense of victimization create distrust between you and your long-term friends. Specifically, why are you suddenly focused on how much privilege I have? Why do you think it is your job to 'hold me accountable' for my privilege?"

I can't remember her exact answer, but I do remember recognizing right away that this spot in the Refuge no longer seemed to be working its magic. Where I had been hoping for more connection, I felt an even greater gulf opening. We could have been anywhere—we could have been sitting in a courtroom—judging from the tension I now felt. Here's what I said in response:

"Everyone is a mix of privileged and oppressed identities, and I believe we end oppression faster if we work from the perspective of our privileged identities. That way, we become accountable for stopping the spread of hurt, instead of blaming others for the ways they still carry distress.

"You keep saying I have more privilege than you, but I don't see it that way. I see us as equals. Let's spell it out: You are a white-passing straight woman of color with an advanced degree that allows you to earn a living wage with part-time work. You became a mother in your 30s by choice, and have spent nine years as a single parent with a passive income that you inherited from your uncle.

"I am a white lesbian who never went to college. I became a mother when I was raped in late adolescence, and spent several years homeless with my child. I've never had a job that paid more than minimum wage. Although my wife now financially supports me, we are raising two kids on a poverty-level income.

"If you want to play Oppression Olympics and see who is the most oppressed, it looks to me like we should just call it equal and let the topic go."

• • •

But she couldn't let the topic go. It bothered her greatly that I was the community bookkeeper and signer of rental contracts, which to her meant that I (one of eight community co-owners) was the "landlord," making all the renters subservient and afraid of me. When I offered to mentor her into the bookkeeper role and take a break for a while, she declined. Her reasoning was two-fold: (1) she was too busy to do any more work for the community; and (2) she didn't want to be in a submissive role where she had to learn something from me.

Even with all these warning signs, I continued to believe we were close long-term friends. We had nearly a decade of mutual support as a relationship foundation. But over the following year, my hopes for the relationship ultimately disintegrated.

Our community has an ownership structure that allows renters to become owners once they've lived here long enough and been invited by the landholders group. We decided to invite Bev to join. What unfolded then is too complex to relay in this story, but involved Bev's continued requests to change the ownership contract before she would sign it, while at the same time asserting that she should have landholder privileges even without signing it.

We attempted to address her concerns about the community, and to look at aspects about it that she wished to change, by bringing in outside facilitators for a visioning session. But once Bev had spent some time airing her grievances and the facilitators tried to keep us on track by moving forward to hear others' concerns, she accused them of racism and walked out. The visioning collapsed in chaos, and the facilitators said they would never again return to work with our community.

We made other efforts to resolve these issues over the next several months, but nothing seemed to help. I tried to respect her boundaries and sensitivities, but as bookkeeper I needed to be clear that until she had signed on to become an "owner," her payments continued to be for "rent." She saw this as a form of

Photos by Chris Roth

oppression, of which she was the victim, and sent an email to the community saying that she would no longer talk to me for any reason, nor read my emails, nor ever be alone with me. She began paying her rent through direct deposit into the community bank account; she always had the cashier note "owner's payment" on the transaction.

Ours is a small community, and it was uncomfortable for everyone to live with Bev's "boundaries" of wanting to avoid me. She also became rude to new residents in particular, including especially a working-class white family that had just moved in. Bev seemed to interpret everything they said and did as either racist or threatening or both. She was openly hostile to them and to several members besides myself as well, and did not hesitate to express this to others.

I understood this at the time as her being so focused on her feelings of victimization that she was unable to be responsible for the ways she was acting out oppressor dynamics towards people who had less privilege than her (new residents, lower-income residents). I hoped that our historical connection as "wounded healers together" would allow her to hear my invitation to do her own personal work—but every time I tried to reach for her, to hold her in a safe container to look at her own part in the conflict, she shrugged me off and continued to blame others.

As the months passed, I felt my attachment landscape shifting. I no longer thought of Bev as one of my friends. How could I be friends with someone who refused to talk to me outside of mediation, and who avoided addressing the conflict when we scheduled help to do so?

• • •

Eventually, Bev notified our community that she had bought a house elsewhere and was moving. The split became complete, although some of the legacy of those troubled times has lingered on within the community.

I am still processing this experience. I listen to John McWhorter, Zandile "Zee" Powell, Andrew Doyle, Kathleen Stock, and Jamie Reed among other public figures, as they offer rational perspectives pushing back against Critical Social Justice and other applied postmodern theories. I slogged my way through *Cynical Theories* by Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, trying to understand the origin of this ideology that ruined my friendship. These big picture/sociological contributions help me depersonalize the dynamic of the serious rupture we endured.

Backed by Critical Social Justice theories, Bev overly identified with the victim aspects of her identity. She tried to find safety and meaning in holding her friends accountable for our racism—while dismissing our concerns that her constant call-outs impacted others as a form of classism. She acted as if she had no responsibility for the privilege she carried, because she had found a way to be the one who had the most legitimate grievance (racism).

Meanwhile, Bev had more present-time institutional privilege than most of the folks in this story. She was a long-term resident with an open invitation to become an owner, and the people she criticized were mostly newer residents who were unsure of their position in the community. When Bev moved out, she bought a house without needing to take out a loan. Many of the (white) folks she created conflict with couldn't even afford the usual rent in our part of the country. If they moved out of the community, they faced potential homelessness.

Among the group of owners, I often wondered why she targeted me, a lesbian with a history of poverty whose stability in the community was based on the unpaid work I was willing to do for the land and people. The content of Bev's attacks against me usually centered on how much "power" I had because of the responsibilities I took on; she didn't seem to notice that the labor I did was both essential for the community's functioning, and the source of my ability to live on the land (my community contribution in exchange for housing).

If I had to leave the community, my quality of life would decrease dramatically as I would be forced to participate in a money economy that I was ill-equipped to succeed in. At the same time, those of our owners who had wealth (and its attendant privileges) seemed not to be the targets of Bev's attacks.

On the face of it, Critical Social Justice may seem to be a way to equalize the power dynamics in society. But the way I see it acted upon in my community, it looks like a power grab. It ignores the importance of the essential work being done, and names those doing that work as "privileged" people with "power over" others. Those who claim to be oppressed give themselves a pass, refusing to take on responsibilities while demanding that others change their behaviors and relinquish the tasks they are accountable for. Any innocent comment or action can be interpreted as racism, and if the white people involved question whether it really is racism (or just an excuse to create a grievance), that query is seen as more evidence of the white person's bigotry (white fragility, white denial).

Critical Social Justice denies the existence of "power with" or earned influence, and names all current influence as a form of oppression. Meanwhile, it seeks to give more influence and power to its adherents, often through manipulative or unilateral means (imposing judgments on others without seeking a societal consensus). It is not open to debate or public conversation about its tenets (#NoDebate). It is currently ascendant in society, and it attracts people who want to make the world better—often the same people who are interested in community living.

After this experience with Bev, our community now screens for polarization. If someone applying for residency shows a strong belief in CSJ perspectives, we invite more pointed conversations about hot-button topics like gender identity, to see how they respond to multiple perspectives on one of the CSJ sacred cows. Can they remember that humans are whole, complex, worthy of respect and kindness, imperfect, and holy? Can they avoid pointing to the words "sacred cows" in this paragraph, and seek the meaning behind them? Or will they say, "Look, I can dismiss everything this author says, because she just proved herself to be a racist when she used these two words that demean Hindu religious beliefs"?

• • •

I no longer trust Bev; our friendship is over. But I don't blame her. Like all wounded healers, she is wounded. If we could have maintained our love, our trust, our faith in our friendship, she could have used it as an opportunity to heal. But this ideology that seemed so useful to her also encouraged her to trust nobody—especially nobody she saw as "white." She was no longer able to lean on me, to believe that I had her best interests at heart. No white person can ever understand a person of color, according to this theory. Never mind that we are both human, and have far more in common than we do differences.

And what about my part? What were my contributions to this conflict? I honestly believe that I am no more or less culpable than any flawed but well-meaning human being. I made mistakes—but I also apologized and made efforts to repair the relationship. Maybe I talked too loud, or didn't explain myself well enough. Or maybe I just took too long to catch on.

I underestimated the divisive nature of a new ideology. I didn't understand how it interferes with our ability to repair the normal day-to-day attachment ruptures that occur in any relationship. I kept inviting someone in closer to me, when she wasn't able to reciprocate the forgiveness and forbearance needed to make any close relationship work. I loved her the best I could. It wasn't enough. ❧

Shannon Kelly (a pseudonym) has changed several details in this article in order to protect the identities of all involved; for her, an ideology, rather than any individual person, is the "villain" of this story.

I underestimated the divisive nature of a new ideology. I didn't understand how it interferes with our ability to repair the normal day-to-day attachment ruptures that occur in any relationship.

Inclusion and Boundaries: Reflecting on "The Great Schism" and "Wounded Healers"

By Crystal Farmer

Chris Roth

In "The Great Schism," a self-described "old white guy" criticizes a community for focusing so much on supporting marginalized people that he feels unwelcome. While I disagree with most of his words, I think he brings up a valid point about boundaries when it comes to making changes to accommodate marginalized people.

When privileged people learn about white supremacy culture, racism, and other oppression, they go through a process of learning how to listen to and advocate for marginalized people around them. Eager to show their sensitivity and often dealing with shame and grief, they start deferring to those with less privilege and enact policies that help "balance the scales."

Marginalized people, on their own journey to empowerment and resilience, often take advantage of this opportunity to use their voice. Surrounded by sympathetic listeners, they call out and educate others, asking for empathy and accountability. In many cases this leads to new initiatives, better relationships, and more equity in communities. In some cases, they overstep boundaries and lead the community into focusing on the needs of one without considering the good of the community.

The community O.W.G. describes has gotten off the track of its social justice journey to the point of being dysfunctional. It's similar to the community in the article "Wounded Healers," where the author's friend Bev has become a strident social justice warrior who rubs people the wrong way. Both of these communities have people whose individual experiences have become the focus of the community's diversity efforts.

Marginalized people, suffering the effects of oppression, will often have poor mental health and may have higher support needs from their family and community. Most intentional communities are not set up to support them. All people have a responsibility to seek healing and education in order to be good communitarians; marginalized people may have less resources to do so. It doesn't mean that marginalized people are not meant for community, but it does mean carefully assessing a community's capacity for support before moving in and as membership and circumstances change.

It's hard to know when a community has gone too far in accommodating a marginalized person, but a rule is when multiple meetings focus on one person's needs instead of community business. From the outside, this mindset is a good one—focus on supporting one person's needs and you'll meet others'—but to me it indicates tunnel vision to the point of exclusion and forgetting that one person's experience is never completely descriptive of a marginalized group.

A desire for inclusion shouldn't mean abandoning boundaries. It means communicating clearly and with empathy for the challenges someone else is experiencing, but drawing a line for people who may need more support than the community is capable of. It's fair for a community to evaluate if they can meet someone's needs at that time and not take on more than they believe is reasonable. They can still do diversity work and advocate for systemic change so that in the future they are truly welcoming and inclusive. ❧

Crystal Byrd Farmer is a writer, speaker, and diversity consultant in the intentional communities movement. She serves as a board member for the Foundation for Intentional Community, the BIPOC Intentional Community Council, and The Sum. In 2020 she published The Token: Common Sense Ideas for Increasing Diversity in Your Organization. *Crystal is passionate about encouraging people to change their perspectives on diversity, relationships, and the world.*

CAN YOU TRUST TOO MUCH?

My Year in a Toxic Community

By Christa "Leila" Dregger

I lived in a toxic community for a year—and by toxic I don't just mean overly influenced by peer pressure and a belief in authority. I mean plagued by active manipulation and mind control, psychological and later physical violence, and extreme drug use.

Being honest about this time means presenting myself not only as a victim, but also as a co-responsible person. And to also mention the good things about this place—so good that I didn't want to admit the bad things for a long time. The good things were: deep trust and a sense of community, an initially wonderful home for children, fantastic parties, and above all, the feeling of consistently working on the big issues that humanity is facing: trauma, violence, sexuality, and gender struggle. Basically, we thought we were the spearhead of evolution.

It was only at the end that I realized: we were not at all beneficial to the world. We were following the delusions of a brilliant but psychotic leader with a deeply paranoid view of the world, of people, and above all, of women. He came to be celebrated as the "light bringer," and eventually believed he could defeat the demons by beating them out of his beloved women—but I was finished by then.

> When "mirrored" by Frieder, you felt deeply seen, understood at the core and at the same time relentlessly criticized.

Why did I participate for so long? After decades of community experience, I should have known better. But I thought I had found my home. I thought we were working towards healing and a better world. And somehow I rested on the belief that others could judge the really important things better than I could. When I did express doubts, the whole group made it clear to me that these were "projections," my "shadow," or "the voice."

I am very glad that I finally "woke up" again and was able to free myself from the undergrowth of intoxication, perpetual self-reflection, and inflated self-regard. My healthy-perceiving, autonomous self had finally prevailed.

I suspect that most of the readers are now thinking: "That would never happen to me." I also suspect they will read on anyway—because there is something in us that wants to get to know these abysses.

Growing up as a German, I had always asked myself: *How could it happen that a*

whole generation of my ancestors found it OK to live under Hitler and to hate people who were different? What kind of human dynamic is behind it when people agree to a system that despises human beings?

After this experience, I now know a part of the answer to that question.

How it started for me

I have lived in community for most of my adult life. A few years ago, it seemed to me that all the communities I knew were losing their strength. Where was the revolutionary awakening? Where was the togetherness? The communities were constantly preoccupied with everyday life; and they were silent about the real issues.

I was looking for a group that was still working as deeply as we had done for years. I found "Clear&Ready"[1]: a community of about 40 young people. A few years before, they had bought a monastery in a small village in southern Germany, and had already become well-known in the German community scene. Some had noticed them as helpful, lively, and unconventional. Others found them cheeky, know-it-all, and annoying. I found both to be true when I met some of the members in various places. I became curious and visited them.

This was the beginning of a time for me—in the middle of the coronavirus lockdown—that I experienced as an awakening into a new reality. I hadn't experienced so much directness, openness, and intimacy between people for a long time. I felt deeply seen and understood in what I had been standing up for all my life. Could it be that these young people—who all could be my children in terms of age—were my new family?

I visited them again and again, got involved more deeply, fell in love with a man there, did a trial period, moved in and...moved out again after a year. It even took time for me to realize that this was my right—and had nothing to do with betrayal.

How the group began

About six years earlier, two young men, Frieder and Michael, had met. In their telling, life had dealt them a bad hand early on. Both had grown up with authoritarian, sometimes violent mothers. Both had survived serious, life-threatening illnesses. And both had worked their way out of their trauma to some extent through their own efforts—at least that's what they said. They promised to help each other to become "what the world needs."

They rented an apartment in an East German city, which soon became a meeting place for friends and seekers. Parties and "processes" took place here, i.e. intensive and confronting in-depth conversations about the personality structures of the participants, the so-called "shadows."

Certainly every newcomer experienced the moment of being "mirrored" by Frieder: You felt deeply seen, taken seriously, understood at the core and at the same time relentlessly criticized. At last, someone seemed to be telling you the truth—and you wanted more. More people joined in. Finally, with the help of an inheritance from a fellow resident, they bought the monastery in southern Germany with a large garden, park, stables, and barn. Over 60 people moved in.

They were active in the local community, helped the farmers, took part in the volunteer fire department and the brass band, and also supported other communities. They ran a health food store in the nearest small town—intended as an information hub for the region. They had a radically common cash register, everything belonged to everyone—or so it seemed. Meals, living room evenings, parties, activities, and process nights were obligatory for everyone. Community life was very lively. Everything was talked about—love, God, sex, politics, personal history—and there was an answer to everything.

What went wrong?

Doesn't that sound good? Clear&Ready could have been a very successful community.

Where did they take a wrong turn? Was it the decision to do "inner work"? No, because a community without inner work on personal habits and structures will sooner or later break down due to its unresolved conflicts and dynamics. Community without self-transformation is not sustainable. And breaking up habitual patterns means getting out of your comfort zone.

I can still agree with all of this today. But I believe that the founders of Clear&Ready overestimated their therapeutic competence. They themselves needed healing! In my opinion, two people with initially good intentions were caught up in their own inscrutable demons and mercilessly fought them in others. Since their system did not tolerate criticism and dissent, the power over others corrupted them and they lost themselves.

What is a process?

"Process work" was at the center of community life. A process could start in any situation—at dinner, at a party, at work. Someone, usually Frieder, would express a perception of a behaviour pattern of someone. If it was something "assy," the whole group came together to talk about it. Now everyone said what negative things they noticed about this person—only the negative things! The person in question was supposed to recognize, "feel," "love," and let go of their shadow. Such a round could go on for many hours, often all night, and often ended with the person concerned being thrown out of the community—if he or she would not do their trial, i.e. did not recognize their shadow. This was usually the case. Then you would have a quarter of an hour to pack your things and move out. Why the harshness? We believed that this harshness was the only help we would give somebody to really change.

Being relentlessly criticized by the whole community for hours and finally thrown out is more than just humiliation. It is an existential extreme situation. You have no way of escaping or asking for time. You feel like a cornered animal.

The founders had isolated themselves against any kind of communal self-correction. I remember saying to Frieder a few weeks after moving in: "You've created a system in which people can score points by denigrating others." He even admitted it, but said: "Take it from me that it's the women. Only you women make it that way. However, you, Christa, would have the power to change it, for the benefit of a whole generation." Although his answer was obviously wrong, at this point I started blaming us women more than seeing what was wrong with the community.

In hindsight, I realize that the two techniques—immense appreciation followed by a shadow process—correspond to what is known in modern cults as *love-bombing* and *gaslighting*: manipulation techniques that are difficult to escape.

I myself was thrown out several times. Then I spent some days and nights in a boarding house, lonely, contrite, and devastated, waiting to be invited back. Even though I didn't understand what they were criticizing me for, I assumed it was true—after all, they were my friends from whom I had learned so many good things. It must be my blind spot! I spent hours trying to recognize my mistake and overcome it. One thing seemed clear: they were only being so tough to help me. I too would have to become tough if I wanted to help people. What a terrible twist! It can break people.

There was no exchange with others to form a different opinion. Because if you talked to another member of the community, even a good friend, about doubts, they would immediately tell the whole group in the name of transparency and you would end up in a process again. And we talked less and less to people from outside—we felt that outsiders were either ignorant or wanted to denigrate our way of life in order to "protect their shadow."

And these same people had supported me so lovingly in my relationship. They had prepared our wedding so creatively; had understood and recognized me so deeply. I trusted them. I didn't want to lose that.

And didn't I also learn some important things? For example, about the subtle power of women and how unwilling most of them are to reveal it? Or that something exists within all of us that permanently fights and suppresses our originally creative and living being—an unconscious social compulsion against life—and that only with the help of others we can overcome it? Frieder once said: "As true as there are wars in the world, there are also war structures within us: the shadows. We must heal and overcome these in love." I still believe that, but I know today that harshness and violence can never do that.

Drug use and escalation

Drugs played an increasingly important role. Using psychedelic drugs such as LSD, ecstasy, and magic mushrooms for therapy and consciousness development was nothing new to me. But the extent to which we used them at Clear&Ready went beyond anything I knew. There were drug parties with up to 50 people for days and nights on end. You weren't forced to take drugs, but it was difficult to talk your way out of it. While at first the focus was on dancing, partying, gambling, and intimacy—and I have blissful memories of some of those nights—as time went on it amounted more and more to a shadow process.

A "process" on drugs can seem even more terrifying and traumatic than without. Michael and Frieder managed to stay focused and in control of the situation

Photos by Chris Roth

even under the influence of many drugs. They presented this ability as a sign of their higher development of consciousness. In reality—as I see it today—a drug high was the field where they could act out their paranoid visions unchecked in front of a frightened community.

And so it eventually escalated. It began with Frieder's extreme jealousy. He accused almost all the men of having had sex with his girlfriend in secret. The most absurd allegations were made—his friend Michael proved his "fidelity" by nodding to everything. Some of the accused denied, but after days admitted to secret sex, just to finally have some peace. Others really wondered: "Is it possible that I had sex and forgot about it afterwards?" One actually considered committing himself to a psychiatric ward because he couldn't remember.

That was the start of a period in which sheer madness reigned—and I eventually left the group. Frieder's paranoid ideas, which no one could contradict without having to leave the group, their home, escalated. They included: the impending war, for which they had to arm themselves, seal themselves off, and stock up on supplies; imaginary satanic cults in which Frieder's former lovers tortured children and wanted to kill him; and an alliance of all women to break Frieder and Michael.

Many members had to leave, lived outside, but continued to put their money in and wanted to rejoin at the next opportunity. One girl had hanged herself after a process night. A new applicant died of unexplained causes during a drug party night. However, the madness continued.

Leaving

I had already left the place at this point—after a night of process, full of accusations and insinuations, I followed a spontaneous impulse that had been subliminally preparing inside me for quite some time. I got up, packed a small rucksack, and left the community for good. In a few hundred meters distance, the whole narrative collapsed inside of me and I asked myself: "What kind of madness are we doing? This is no way to treat people." I had finally woken up. Better late than never.

I needed a lawyer to ensure that I was allowed to collect at least some of my personal possessions such as clothes and papers. I was now considered *persona non grata*. But I was reunited with my husband and other people who had left the group before.

Today

The madness in the monastery continued and still continues. I worry about my friends, who still think that everything is right there—even when Frieder's girlfriend was taken to hospital with bruises and bite wounds and the police were called. Since then, he's been on trial for assault and rape.

I'm sad and angry that the big dream has led to so much pain and confusion. Nevertheless, Clear&Ready has not been able to destroy my community dream; on the contrary, it has been renewed. I still want to build a community with this great intensity, closeness, and revolutionary enthusiasm—without falling into such a delusion.

Back to the question: Is it possible to trust too much?

No. Trust is always the right decision. But I can recognize real trust by the fact that I can freely express doubts, criticism, and corrections. That's why trust starts with myself: with my inner voice, my sense of right and wrong, my courage to contradict a group opinion. I think that a good group not only has good leaders—but also responsible and alert members who not only let their leaders do their thing, but also ask questions, criticize if necessary, and perhaps even stop them once in a while. Otherwise we leave them alone at a very important point.

Anyone who still believes that this could never happen to them should remember Solomon Asch's conformity experiment: a series of studies that show how peer pressure influences people to evaluate an obviously false statement as correct. Only a quarter of all test persons remained true to their perception. Trust in ourselves therefore still seems to be one of the learning tasks of our species. ❧

Christa "Leila" Dregger, journalist, community expert, lived at ZEGG/Germany and Tamera/Portugal for many years before joining "Clear&Ready" for a year. At the beginning of 2024, she started Terra Nova community, where, "In addition to managing our hotel on the Baltic Sea, we work together to bring individuality and community together. Each individual is responsible for ensuring that we live our values: Truth, caring for one another, compassion for the world." See terranova-begegnungsraum.de.

---

1. All names have been changed.

Finding Political Clarity

By Josh Fattal

Attendees discuss political issues at a gathering at the Center for Rural Livelihoods, 2023.

The author.

Photos courtesy of Josh Fattal

I arrived to an intentional community as a leftist and I naively assumed everyone else was a leftist. It was 2005. I participated in the anti-globalization movement, protested the US invasion of Iraq, and marched against corporate power in the Bay Area, but I wanted to live with nature, to live in community, and to continue activism.

At first, everything I encountered confirmed my bias that I was encountering leftists. The first person to tour me around was gay. Another community member was named after a yoga chant. A man in his 50s who held authority in the community spoke about helping poor people in the third world through people-to-people grassroots connections. And, of course, everything was organic, whole foods, with pedal power grain grinder, and there was that keystone symbol of Bay Area leftism: bicycles.

To understand what a community's actual politics is, however, is to ask how its actions affect the distribution of power in society. What kind of actions was our community taking in the public sphere? Public spaces constitute the quintessential sphere of politics.

There was some left-*ish* politics in the community, but ultimately the community's activities were not as political as they were cultural. Private personal actions were sometimes treated as politics. One's relationships, language, and style were thought to be an embodiment of one's politics. "The personal is political" was taken very literally. Yet zooming out to the political contests over the distribution of power in our society, the subculture was not too concerned about it. That is to say, it was not too interested in the politics that determine what kind of world our society is creating, whether we will have a livable planet in a few generations, whether hierarchies will face resistance or go unchecked in public, whether strangers are treated with care and compassion or with suspicion and brutality. Most everyone *cared* about these things, but there wasn't any community-wide sustained engagement in how to affect these things. There were often more pressing issues on the land, and the magical thinking that if we embodied our ideals, change might ripple out tremendously.

What could have been detected back in the 2000s by a more astute observer, but is much more apparent to me now, is that the lack of a coherent political framework makes the countercultural trappings that pervade intentional communities very susceptible to serving pro-capitalist, pro-hierarchy, and centrist or right wing agendas. Indeed, countercultural symbols are now a part of many political legacies. Nowadays, the once-subversive Pride parades in big cities are littered with corporate sponsorship and are officially sanctioned. Yoga transformed into a big business used to optimize productivity and its publications like *Yoga International* are bought up by right wing conspiracy theorists. The man in his 50s who spoke of helping poor people at the grassroots level eventually received millions of dollars from the Shell Foundation and other sponsors to build factories for "appropriate technology," green-lighted by authoritarians like the Chinese government. The bible of the whole foods movement, *Nourishing Traditions,* is written from a condescending Eurocentric perspective and its author commands a loyal following that peddles misinformation. The growth of the organic movement led to large corporate profits and unpasteurized milk has become a conservative symbol.

The political lesson is that symbols, techniques, and styles are *politically promiscuous.* I had initially assumed that what I encountered in the intentional community implied a leftist politics, but ecological practices could just as easily be part of a centrist, right wing, or an apolitical orientation.

Historically, naturalistic frameworks and practices have served a variety of political tendencies. Since the hippie generation of 1965-1970s took ecological perspectives seriously, many people today associate ecology with the political left, but that association is historically specific to hippies and their offshoots. (My community, founded in the late 1970s, had a leftist initial impulse; the founders constituted the community as a means towards radical political change throughout society.)

In other times and at other places, environmental thinking had other political meanings. The conservation movement of the previous two centuries in the US notoriously used wilderness preservation and land conservation as a means to deprive Native Americans from access to land. Israel has strategically placed land conservancies around Palestinian villages in order to prohibit their growth. The Soviet Union found ecological science to be compatible with totalitarianism and the Nazi party had a "green" wing that was very interested in ecology and whole grains (Hitler was a vegetarian, unless you count the supplements of cow testicles he ingested). Recent mass shooters have had eco-fascist manifestos. The historical record is rife with examples of how living by and espousing ecological principles is politically promiscuous—ecology could lend itself to a variety of politics.

For several years many people leveled some form of this critique at my intentional community—that its mostly white environmentalist members were privileged and complicit with systemic oppressions. However, the community did not respond by articulating a coherent political orientation. Instead of a political framework, the response to the critique was to "diversify." In this way, identity stood in for politics. Rather than formulating and expressing a coherent political outlook, they put sustained effort to incorporate a more diverse population within the organization. However, like organic agriculture or yoga or appropriate technology, a racially and gender diverse organization can also be leftist, centrist, or right wing. Using identity as a vague symbol for political leanings is a method for avoiding reckoning with politics head-on.

One's position in society does *not determine* one's political consciousness. However, one's material conditions do *suggest* avenues for thought. Because a slave is in an antagonistic position to a slave society, the enslaved person is *more likely* to develop a revolutionary consciousness. To be an intentional community in the United States today does not necessarily dictate its politics. If anything, the typical emphasis of ICs to produce their own food and their tendency towards insularity suggest that ICs' position on the margins of society encourages an apolitical withdrawal from public life—and people seeking to withdraw from society are attracted to ICs.

Yet ICs are in no way doomed to political avoidance. How a community engages publicly, how it behaves to change the distribution of power in society, is a choice.

After a 10-year hiatus from the community and its nonprofit organization, I returned to a collapsed organization and a sparse community in 2018. I became the director of the nonprofit in 2022, and redefined the scope of the "community" to include the nearby town—not just the landmates. Our mission is to transform the economic and political life of the region by developing a force for an equitable economy rooted in ecological regeneration. This, of course, requires a massive shift of power into the hands of bottom-up community initiatives. This radical municipalism is core to our politics.

The residents are no longer in an intentional community on the land. Rather, they are temporary residents of the land for a couple years with the purpose of incubating a project with which they will affect the wider community. We are searching for ways in which these initiatives can combine synergistically to greater effect. Clear politics results from political dialogue, political education, and public action. The incubation program is one expression of our politics that came from a conscious choice and strategy for effecting social change. How a community relates to and impacts the rest of society is its politics. The political significance of experimental ecological practices and of individualistic behaviors is dwarfed by political tides that shape the very structure of the world.

Our nonprofit community has recently changed its name and is now the Center for Rural Livelihoods. It is now focused on political education for its residents. Historians have described the 1970s as the beginning of the "Age of Fracture," thanks in part to the emergence of cable TV in that decade. Mass culture was fracturing into many parts. The disintegration of traditional community along with the splintering of mass society into fractured isolated particles continued for decades under neoliberalism and was further accelerated by social media since the 2010s. Navigating online influencers, state-sponsored disinformation, corporate misinformation, and the rest of the sensory barrage inside our cell phones leaves many people politically perplexed and manipulated.

Historically rigorous and theoretically grounded frameworks can help us maneuver into clearer ideological waters, enabling political clarity. At this critical historical juncture when the rapacious, liberal world order is under attack from authoritarian and repressive right wing social movements around the world, a truly liberatory alternative needs informed strategy and political astuteness to be born. ❧

Josh Fattal is the director of the Center for Rural Livelihoods (rurallivelihoods.org). He is a coauthor of the memoir, A Sliver of Light: Three Americans Detained in Iran, *holds a Ph.D. in history, and is founder of the Freedom and Justice for All PAC.*

IN PRAISE OF BEING: Lifestyle as an act of politics and power

By Riana Good

The Talmud states, “It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but nor are you free to desist from it.” As a white Ashkenazi Northeast US Jew, granddaughter of immigrants on both sides of my family, I acquired quite a few overactive-doing tendencies along with a commitment to support the wellness of all beings. I declared myself a vegetarian at age five, started an Amnesty International chapter in high school, participated in electoral politics and various campaigns and social justice issues, served as co-chair of the Green Party of Rhode Island, worked as a community organizer for environmental justice, organized colleagues as a union representative, and marched and chanted at countless events and protests.

There is no “opting out” of the system, though these days I am farther from it. I am opting in to my deepest longing and vision.

Now I express my values by living off-grid, eating super-local, and residing and working in community. I am so grateful to live wild and simply. I thrive in the throbbing vitality of this barefoot, no-walls existence. I rejoice in the impermanence, in the accelerated growth and decay, the quivers of volcanic activity and the crash of the waves. I celebrate my good fortune to be able to dedicate myself to community living, to remembering what has been and can be possible.

I left teaching in the Boston Public Schools for a variety of reasons, including feeling complicit in perpetuating a system of schooling that often dehumanized rather than liberated students. When I left, a friend and colleague led me to consider whether I was still complicit by leaving the system without actively changing it. Peace Pilgrim reminds us, “Collective problems must be solved by all of us, collectively, and no one finds inner peace who avoids doing his or her share in the solving of collective problems.”

I understand that supporting world balance happens in many ways. Though I still struggle with whether I am adequately doing my share, I feel more in integrity

Photos courtesy of Riana Good

now than when I was more actively or obviously participating in world change. Then again, my personal preferences may lead me to rationalize my choices—and, I am okay with that. I am proud of the love and respect with which I treat myself and all with whom I come in contact, and my all-in commitment to community. And, in inhabiting a human body, we are inherently going to do some harm, so I am cutting myself some slack and releasing some of my guilt.

• • •

Moving to Hawaii was about the last thing that my political activist self would have imagined.

We are all on native land, though living as a white, mainland-born US citizen in the very recently colonized Kingdom of Hawaii is particularly complex and problematic. My mere existence here may contribute to the occupation, though even if Hawaii were to be deoccupied today, the institutional and psychological frameworks would persist. Being a settler ally may be a contradiction in terms, and a full treatment of the matter goes beyond the scope of this piece. However, I am doing my best to justify my presence here by recognizing my settler privilege, listening with love and humility, and aspiring to be in right relationship with the land and its peoples. The more I listen and attune, the more in integrity I feel.

The ever-changing nature of life, of fecundity and growth and decay, is particularly present here in Hawaii. And the climate of Hawaii is sublime for permaculture-inspired practices that acknowledge cycles of change and transformation. Twelve of us live together on about 20 acres. All of our water comes from rainwater catchment, and we filter it through a Berkey filter for drinking. Solar panels are our electricity source. We heat the water for our main shower by cycling coils through a pile of mulch that we switch out every three months, and then use the decomposed mulch as soil. We cut down dead wood and invasive species of trees and use them to mulch newly planted trees and as fuel. We light fires for a variety of reasons, including to cook bone broth and when we gather to make music or hold heartshare circles. At the end of the night, we douse the logs in water to create biochar to add to our soil mix. Our soil mix also includes a variety of sources of compost, which cycles energy through our bodies, back to the land, and then through our bodies again.

There is glorious and abundant food! I eat predominantly from our land, and after over 30 years of being vegan, this has led me to start eating meat. I help to butcher the wild pigs that we catch in traps and eat chicken and duck and fish from our land—along with a plethora of fruits, vegetables, roots, and herbs. I supplement this with grass-fed beef and chocolate—both from the Island, direct from the growers. Though I sometimes eat what others share with me, I have not purchased any food from a store in a long, long time.

• • •

By living in community, we diminish the need for accumulating more individual possessions by instead sharing items—everything from bikes to tools to appliances. I sleep directly on the earth, beneath a tarp, and keep my possessions in a large plastic bin. (I also have bins in two other states, so I'm living a five-bin lifestyle.) Almost all of my possessions are second-hand, and I mend my clothing over and over and over again, sometimes beyond what others might consider reasonable, though it is a source of pride for me.

Some choices align less with our values, though help to support our lifestyle. We aspire to be self-sustaining, and yet as individuals and as a community we order a whole bunch of items from Amazon—bandaids, Ziploc bags, shoes, supplements. The farm has almost as many vehicles as people. I am grappling with what it means to eat meat after over 30 years as a vegan. For now, though I still question the ethics of killing and eating another sentient living being, I hold that complexity in balance with it being the most local, simple, and perhaps "natural" route. We use almost all of the parts of the animal to the best of our ability, with reverence and gratitude. This is my current choice, and perhaps my relationship to animals and food will change again in the future. For the time being, I am grateful to plastic and fossil fuels and animals for how they serve us.

Moving towards full integrity, I still have a ways to go to live what I believe to be true: that none of us is well until all of us are well, that I am not better off to have more if some of us still have less, that I will be held and supported by others if I am in need. I aspire to give and give until I have nothing left to give. I would rather risk that I am wrong and experience hardship than hold on to what I have out of fear. I'm not quite there yet, though as I delve deeper into community, my trust increases.

• • •

We are a community that labors together, sings together, dances and plays together! We are a community that learns together, putting into practice the series of Nonviolent Communication classes that we took together in our twice-monthly heartshare circles. We are a community that seeks to repair harm, requesting conversations and councils to move towards greater understanding. We celebrate our bodies in the flow of life, and our clothing-optional lifestyle celebrates the naturalness and beauty of bodies of all shapes and sizes, helping to dispel associations of shame and sin around having a body.

I dedicate myself to community, to supporting the vision of living a more interconnected life, to being part of a model of what is possible. As adrienne maree brown asserts, "i am a microcosm of all the possible justice, liberation, pleasure and honesty in the universe, and i act accordingly." I deeply believe that we can do this, so I am backing community, loving community, living as a Deep Communitarian, as living proof that community is good, that community is beautiful, that community is worth it, that community works! Despite the challenges of living with others that may lead us to independence and isolation, we can't go it alone. Together is the way! ❧

Riana Good has lived in intentional communities in Alaska, Arizona, California, Oregon, Massachusetts, and Hawaii. See her previous articles in COMMUNITIES *#196, #197, #201, #202, and #203.*

Tikkun Olam–World Repair

Am I doing my piece of the re-piecing, of World Repair? I was taught and had understood מָלוֹע ןוּקִּית Tikkun Olam–World Repair–to be Social Action, with an emphasis on the action. I used to think that more doing was important for changing the world and for remaining in integrity and putting love and compassion into action. Now I am softening and slowing and learning more of what it is like to prioritize being.

"Repairing" the world implies brokenness–and there has been fragmentation that we can bring into more harmony and balance. If our work is to repair or defragment our own selves and all beings, then returning to Oneness, to breath, to prayer, to being is foundational. I could be "doing" more towards collective peace, and some could be "being" more towards collective peace, and I am exploring that being/doing balance. There was a time where I was mostly "doing" and would take breaks to "be," and I feel fortunate to be able to experiment with lots of being, with more selective and intentional doing.

One choice is not a criticism of another choice. I was not wrong and others are not wrong for taking more active roles towards political change–it just depends on how and where we are called. It is good that we all follow our own path towards individual and collective well-being.

–RG

Political Engagement in a Multifaith Community

By Joyce Bressler

Supporting farm workers' call to boycott Wendy's.

CLT Facebook

Jewish protest at Immigrant Detention Center.

CLT Facebook

For eight years, beginning in 2013, I was part of a multifaith intentional community, the Community of Living Traditions (CLT), founded in 2009, where political engagement was an integral part of our self-definition. We defined our political engagement as working for social change and supporting progressive movements and causes, based on our various religious traditions and our commitment to faith-based activism and nonviolence. We were intentionally bringing together Jews, Muslims, Christians, and later included other faiths.

A unique aspect of this experience is that we lived on the property of the Stony Point Conference Center (SPC), in Stony Point, New York, owned by the national Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) based in Kentucky. Our housing and food were connected to the specific number of volunteer work hours we were committed to provide, to support the paid staff that operated SPC. That work included working on the farm that produced food for the kitchen, working in the kitchen, housekeeping, working in the gift shop, hosting groups, special projects, and leading programs. The remaining time could be used for internal community building and outside community engagement or organizing. Some of our time engaged in organizing was publicity for the center. Outreach to diverse groups brought their conferences, retreats, and meetings to SPC. Many came because of the work of CLT. Since the conference center was owned by a Christian church, bringing in groups of people from other faiths as well as activist groups broadened the customer base of the center. It was important to offer diverse groups a safe space to meet—and to especially be welcoming to BIPOC and LGBTQ+ people.

Our intention as a multifaith community of primarily Christians, Muslims, and Jews was to be involved in faith-based movements for peace, racial and economic justice, environmental and food justice. We created a small farm that provided food for the dining hall and supported political activities, such as causes helping farm workers. The farm offered educational programs to schools and other groups. CLT and SPC ran a summer institute for young adults called "Farm the Land, Grow the Spirit." We brought people from the United States and around the world from different faiths and nationalities to live together, learn from each other, study with the community, work on the farm, and then to apply what they learned back home or to their next adventure. A few of these participants would also join the CLT as residents. Many have gone on to be leaders for justice and social change worldwide.

We worked to build interfaith alliances and to speak out in the larger world. One intention of the founders was to bring these faiths together to address issues of peace and justice related to Israel/Palestine. Carving out a space for hard conversations, we also struggled with and addressed internal issues related to race, class, and other areas of oppression and power relations.

We sent delegations to places that needed support after and during major events. For example, we sent delegations to Ferguson, Missouri to protest police brutality after the murder of Michael Brown; and to Standing Rock to support the water protectors and the protest encampment against the Dakota Access Pipeline. Closer to home we worked to support the Ramapough Munsee Lenape Nation, in their solidarity encampment with Standing Rock, and with local environmental and other justice issues they faced. We worked to build connections with a local immigrant community that were forced out of their homes due to Hurricane Sandy in 2012; advocacy eventually led to the creation of an immigrant-led rights organization, called Proyecto Faro (Project Lighthouse) (www.proyectofaro.org). I helped to create a Jewish organization, Rockland Jews for Immigrant Justice (RJIJ), that brought together local synagogues and others to support our immigrant neighbors in solidarity with Proyecto Faro.

We collaborated with staff and management when we organized an annual awards dinner/fundraiser for CLT. We called the award the Living Traditions Award. The CLT, the staff, and supporters helped to select the awardees. The dinner was accompanied by a silent auction and a fair. We honored an individual or group that personified our values. Some of the awardees included a Buddhist nun who walked for peace, a Muslim farmer, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice of New York City, and Cori Bush for her activities for racial justice, before she became a Congressperson.

Structure and Governance

It was not easy to balance our work responsibilities for SPC and our social justice activities and community life. How each member participated in political engagement varied, depending on their personal interests and time available. Different individuals took on specific issues and campaigns. Some used their time with the support of the center and the community to attend conferences and gatherings in North America and elsewhere around the world. Others like myself focused on local organizing, or hosting groups that came for conferences.

When choosing issues to focus on we supported individuals' passions, but it sometimes caused competition for resources. CLT had funds allocated from donations to it from SPC for our activist work. We had a finance committee that worked with those at the center who created the budgets. When some in the community wanted to build a consensus to establish issue priorities, others resisted that approach. Trying to build consensus on what issues we would work on as a community while also continuing to support individuals' creativity and passions is not always easy to balance. Trying to move from a system focusing on the individual to one where these priorities were collectively decided was a source of tension. In my view one of the underlying causes of these tensions lay in the community culture previously established within the hierarchy of running a business (albeit a nonprofit one). Even as we work toward building a cooperative culture, we still must change our internal conditioning and attitudes we were raised with in a capitalist society.

As I mentioned earlier our housing and food were tied to our work hours for the conference center. Housing issues were another source of contention, due to our governance and hierarchical structures. When someone joined CLT, they moved into housing options that were available—sometimes with roommates, sometimes in single or family units. When a more desir-

2020 BLM protest in Stony Point, New York.

CLT archives

Cori Bush, the Living Traditions Awardee 2019.

Susan Stava Photography—licensing available

able space became available, current residents had the option to move in to those spaces as well. Management of SPC was responsible for placing people in housing; community members had input, but SPC managers made the final decisions. As time passed and a core group emerged at CLT, we worked toward a more democratic and cooperative way of making these decisions, within the bounds of the business of running the center. We added a housing committee to the list of committees. It helped us identify maintenance issues and find ways to be more cooperative in how housing was assigned—with both successes and failures in achieving this goal.

Much of this work was done in collaboration with the Stony Point Conference Center co-directors who were among the founders of the Community of Living Traditions. They had the vision of creating an intentional multifaith community on the property of the conference center, and were the liaisons with the Presbyterian Church USA in Kentucky. They held them at bay and negotiated with them on our behalf. I commend our co-directors for their vision of bringing a multifaith intentional community to exist at the SPC. There was both resistance and support in different parts of the church hierarchy for our experiment. As leadership changed the PCUSA desired to make changes to our volunteer roles, based on their risk assessment of having a residential community on the property.

When the pandemic hit in 2020, the conference center was forced to close, as the hospitality industry dried up. The underlying contradictions of maintaining an intentional community on the property of a conference center came to a head. The people at the national church were in survival mode, and no longer wanted the responsibility of residents on the property. It became clear to me that any intention on the part of the PCUSA to make SPC a truly multifaith space had been a facade. After months of negotiations and attempts to maintain a place for the CLT there, we were all asked to leave. Our negotiated terms included time for people to safely relocate during a pandemic, and some financial assistance in moving expenses. Most agreed (reluctantly) and left by the Summer of 2021. For details, see my article in the Spring 2022 issue, "The Journey of a Multifaith Community and What Happens When You Don't Own the Land?" (COMMUNITIES #194, pages 42-44). The CLT became a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization at the request of the church, as a requirement for us to work with them on the land. But in the end those efforts did not convince the powers that be in their Kentucky headquarters that we were a safe enough risk to their bottom line and legal structure to stay. The SPC has reemerged, post pandemic, a different place without the CLT, and without a residential community. Our nonprofit, the Community of Living Traditions, Inc., currently exists as an educational organization.

As time has passed, I can reflect with a more objective view. Writing this article, I am amazed at what we accomplished in our time together. And with all my anger at the church for kicking us out, I am grateful for having had that space for as long as we did, and the explicit opportunity to include political engagement as part of an intentional community. I give the credit to our co-directors and the other founders for the vision they had to start a politically engaged multifaith intentional community on the property of a conference center. As we have all moved on to other communities or life situations, this experiment has had lasting effects on all who lived there, all those who came for retreats and conferences, and all those we encountered in the wider world.

Dedicated to the memory of our members who have passed on: Mark Johnson and Norman Gottwald. ❧

Joyce Bressler, a longtime activist, and organizer, worked in social justice movements for over 50 years. Raised by first-generation Jewish American parents in a neighborhood with extended family, she always felt that the lifestyle of support, cooperation, and mutual aid was the basis for a healthy society. Still engaged in movements for change, she supports the leadership of the younger generations now in the forefront of our current struggles. She is the Co-Chair of the Community of Living Traditions, Inc., and the Ads Manager for COMMUNITIES. *Contact her at ads@gen-us.net.*

CONFRONTING OUR PAST: Why We Renamed Our Cohousing Community

By Laura Fitch, Andrew Grant, Mary Porcino, and Beth Siftar

We at the newly renamed *Cherry Hill Cohousing* would like to share the story of our developing awareness about the land we live on and the name of our community. As we speak of our identity crisis in response to the American Indian struggle for survival, we acknowledge that these are vastly different experiences and scales of impact.

Cohousing communities are designed to foster connection and resource sharing, reminiscent of traditional villages worldwide.

Cherry Hill Cohousing is a stable, thriving, intentional community in western Massachusetts. We are people of various ages, ethnicities, incomes, and household configurations. Thirty-two units are clustered in a loop, nestled into a hillside, with a large Common House at the bottom. Much of the land is protected for agricultural use and undisturbed forest, including native black cherry trees.

As our community grew and evolved, some members questioned whether our initial Pioneer Valley name aligned with our vision of celebrating life's joys, transforming ourselves through conflict and forgiveness, and welcoming differences as connecting bridges. This questioning sparked a journey of self-reflection and education about the complex history of the land we call home.

Since 1993, *Pioneer Valley Cohousing Community* has been our public name. Facing hard facts about the attempted erasure of Native Peoples, including a nearby massacre in 1676, inspired us to seek a new name. Ultimately, we walked away from *Pioneer Valley* as a matter of integrity.

Making cherry pie in the cohousing kitchen.

John Fabel

It has been a journey of many steps, starting with self-education and including some members engaging in book groups, attending lectures, and consulting Indigenous associates.

Remarkably, we learned that the ancestor of one of our residents witnessed the settler claim on this very parcel of land when three members of the Nonotuck tribe signed their X to white man's papers in 1658. She says, "Once you uncover the more complete story of our land, it cannot be forgotten. It becomes something you want to address both symbolically in a name change and more profoundly by supporting further education and redressing the wrongs wrought upon the Indigenous Peoples and their descendants who still live among us."

A critical step was "un-learning" indifference toward Native life and culture, especially in the middle Connecticut River Valley. David Brule, board chair of the Nolumbeka Project, a nonprofit honoring northeastern tribal heritage, told us: "The implication inherent in the word 'Pioneer' is that this Valley needed to be conquered, tamed, and ripped from the wilderness. It ignores the countless Native peoples who were stewards of this land for thousands of years. This [name] change is another step in respecting those ancestors and their descendants living here today."

Wars of conquest and forced assimilation of children, among other strategies, have reduced Indigenous populations and disrupted traditional societies. Many people view what happened here in the valley and beyond as genocide, at least by modern standards.

In the 1990s, when choosing a name for the new community, some members were already concerned about negative associations with *Pioneer Valley*. For others, it was a good fit because we were "pioneers"—building the first (contemporary) cohousing community east of the Mississippi and learning how to live cooperatively.

Thirty years later, after a renewed struggle with our name, we got to a place where no one objected to dropping the *Pioneer Valley* identity. As a community founder said, "after a long and sometimes wrenchingly hard process, we have arrived, little by little, at a new name—one tiny step towards justice."

We decided to go with the name given by the 20th-century farmer who tended this land and envisioned a village adjacent to a public golf course, both named *Cherry Hill.* For decades, *Cherry Hill Condominium Association* has been the legal name of our community. Now, we are embracing it as our identity—*Cherry Hill Cohousing.*

An early response from Trish Becker-Hafnor, executive director of the Cohousing Association of the United States, softened concerns about risking the national reputation we built on our previous name. She wrote, "As we seek to impact justice and inclusion, this is a shining example of putting action behind our words."

Once we found our way home to this name, *Cherry Hill Cohousing,* the relief was palpable. To celebrate, the kids helped make cherry pies for the next community meal. ❧

The authors of this article were part of a helping circle that formed in the fall of 2022 to retrace the steps we took that led to changing our name from Pioneer Valley Cohousing Community to Cherry Hill Cohousing. One of the members of that circle was architect Laura Fitch, who passed away suddenly on January 1, 2023, at age 62. For Laura, this was personal; her 17th-century settler ancestor signed as a witness to the taking of the land from the original Nonotuck community. Laura lived in Cherry Hill Cohousing in Amherst, Massachusetts, since it was built in 1994. Through designing other cohousing communities and her advocacy for intentional living, Laura's legacy and contributions live on, including in this article.

CherryHillCohousing.org

A DESIRE TO SERVE:

The Experience of Military Veterans in Intentional Communities

By Avi Kruley, Sky Blue, and Zach Rubin

Dave Booda flanked by fellow Naval Officers while in military service....

...and Dave Booda today, in intentional community (this and remaining photos—see also article, p. 49).

Photos courtesy of Sky Blue

What is the impact of Intentional Community (IC) on the world, and what does it offer to individuals? In January of 2023, we three communitarians brainstormed new and different ways to explore these critical questions to the IC movement. We turned our focus to an oft-overlooked population that has unique experience living and working in community with a common purpose, albeit in a different form—military veterans.

How might we study the indicators and ill effects of not having IC in your life? And what might that illuminate about IC in general? We theorized that veterans would be an ideal population to consider this since they have such varied touchpoints of being in (and out of) community, and assuming they also have a strong enough sense of community to know when it is missing. Cultivating a deeper sense of understanding for what we have when living in IC, as well as what we are missing when we are not, feels paramount to connecting the value of ICs to the larger world around them. Thus, we arrived at the purpose of our project: to compare and contrast the experiences military veterans have had during their military service, during their time living in IC, and while living as a civilian in mainstream society.

The first step in our data gathering journey was to distribute a survey using the site Qualtrics. Avi and Sky sent emails to clients, friends, and their social networks to spread the word, and the big push came from the Foundation for Intentional Community sending out two email announcements to its listserv. In all, 70 people responded to the survey. And from that number, many people additionally selected that they would be interested in one-on-one interviews with the research team.

Over the summer and early fall of 2023, Avi and Zach conducted 32 interviews. These ranged in length from about 40 minutes to almost two hours depending on what the person had to say. All but one were conducted over Zoom (Zach managed to catch someone face-to-face while traveling). In both the survey and the interviews, respondents had to agree to an informed consent script verified by the Institutional Review Board of Zach's employer, Lander University, to ensure that the project met with all legal and ethical standards for human subjects research. Also in keeping with those standards, any names we give below are pseudonyms, and any other information that could be used to identify someone, such as the name of the community they live(d) in, has been obscured or altered.

We are still in the "data processing" stage as we write this, since the transcripts of our interviews total almost a thousand pages. Part of our research process—and this is the stage we're engaged in with this article—involves reflecting on first impressions and major themes that we noticed, which can be firmed up and better organized later as we go further through all the data. These first impressions break down into three major themes.

First, the connection between veterans and ICs wasn't obvious to many of the interviewees, and several offered appreciation for being asked about both and making the connection explicit. For some, the time between military service and communal living was a substantial gap—a decade or more. Army veteran Ember, as one example, said, "my military service and my intentional community life, there was a whole lifetime between those two." Others found the connection right away, and two interviewees had times where their service and life in community overlapped. Many simply stumbled on IC, rather than being motivated to find something they were lacking after leaving service.

One portion of these veterans found a community during a period of crisis, often crisis that related back to experiences or trauma from their time in service. Many of them heard about a community from a friend or from random happenstance. Barnet, an Army veteran who served throughout the 1990s, heard about the community he's lived in now for over a decade while searching for internships, because it "was my solution to homelessness, you know what I mean? So, trying to find that sense of belonging and purpose, and not be on the streets." Tabina, an Air Force veteran still in her 20s and victim of sexual assault while in service, was recommended to consider joining a therapeutically-focused community by her therapist and ended up finding it fulfilling enough to continue pursuing community. Garlot, a Vietnam veteran, described several decades of turmoil and drug abuse after leaving the service until he found the urban community he lives in now that helped him become and stay sober.

Another portion did make that connection and were seeking something from communal life that they had also sought when joining the service. These veterans did tend to have positive experiences while in service; comradery, mutual trust, and a sense of belonging or connection to a larger mission were all common themes among this portion. This was especially true for the two people we interviewed who did not serve in the United States, but rather in other countries where they were less likely to be deployed in combat and more for development or peacekeeping missions. Myra, an Army veteran, said something captured in a lot of interviews about why veterans would have an affinity for community later on: "you know, the Army prescribes these values, right? But one that most people really seem to feel connected to was selfless service and so this idea of, you know, your buddy needs something, you help 'em out...for the most part, people genuinely wanted to serve and give, and that was, you know, for the most part, regardless of upbringing, culture, other beliefs." The idea of selfless service—seeing oneself as a part of the whole rather than an isolated individual—popped up over and over again in our interviews as a point of connection between the ICs and the military.

Second, many biographies of the people we interviewed seemed to be heavily shaped by the presence or absence of compulsory conscription. That is, the draft greatly affected the reasons why people joined, which then influenced their feelings about service during and after, and finally impacted how their military experience segued into communal life. Vietnam-era veterans often defined their service in relationship to the draft, while post-draft veterans have more diverse relationships to their service.

Most of the veterans we interviewed from the Vietnam era had negative views on their time in service, as well as the role of the military in the US culture more broadly. Some, like Finn, joined the institution in honor of a family military tradition. But a friend of Finn's pointed him to the National Guard over other branches, which he described in his interview as a blessing because it meant he would not get sent over to the actively expanding conflict in Vietnam. Peter Hoyt, who we didn't interview but whose autobiography *First Boomer* we read for this project, describes enlisting in the Navy in a desperate attempt to avoid being on "Uncle Sam's list of potential cannon fodder" via the draft. Those who were drafted typically joined an IC as part of their embrace of counterculture resulting from their time in service.

Outside of draftees, it's a mixed bag. Many still value the strengths and friends they gained from the experience, even if those were not enough to draw them back into the service they had left. Others viewed that time in their life through an extremely negative lens because they felt they never fit in or aligned with the mission of the institution, such as Carlow who said, "most of my Navy experience kind of felt like a joke, like there was this whole sense of sarcasm to it." Sentiments like his were especially common among the LGBTQIA+ veterans we interviewed who served during and before the era of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. They certainly felt that the military didn't have a vision that included them, but they found communities that did.

Third, a surprising number of respondents reflected positively on their service overall, defying the stereotype (and some of our own preconceived notions) of the peace-loving hippie you would expect to find in an IC. Interviewees spoke to several reasons for a positive outlook on their time in service, even despite a lack of alignment at present. Army veteran Audie shared, "the military doesn't really resonate with who I am as a person now, but it saved my life at the time…. I didn't know where my life was headed at the time and it kind of helped me bring focus to my life."

Audie was not alone in feeling as if the military offered something that was needed and hard to find in the civilian world. Air Force veteran Eda appreciated the structure of military life and how that allowed her to embrace her own strengths: "something that I learned that or maybe more that I realized I benefited from being in the military, was being in a high-structure environment. So, I'm a high-structure person and I bring that to my committee work and so I ask for accountability and transparency." Cedric, also an Air Force veteran, similarly commented on the structured aspect of military life and how that allowed for more ease in socializing and creating community: "There's a lot you don't have to think about when you're in the military. You don't have to think about eating. You don't have to think about dressing. You don't have to think about your schedule...that feels really good. That's the part that I crave, is like you don't find much structure in the civilian world you know, and especially socially, then you're lost and you have to make your own community and make your own placement."

A strong sense of connection to one's unit was frequently mentioned in our interviews. The life-and-death nature of the military cultivates quick and deep bonds, some that last a lifetime. Wyndham, an Army veteran now in his 70s, is a prime example of this: "I made a lot

of friends in the military. We're still friends after all these years." Surprisingly to us, several interviewees touted the diversity of both people and thought they experienced while in the military. Another Army veteran, Roddus, reflected on his background and how the military exposed him to more people who were different than him: "the guys I met there, the ones who I made friends with...they were a diverse lot that's one. I was raised in a Catholic parish my whole life. Right? Went to Catholic schools. There were all kinds of guys, you know from different you know...Black men, Hispanic men. You know, non-Catholics."

Finally, gaining skills and advancing personal growth were named as positive outcomes from time in service. Audie shared that she "learned about myself, learned how to cohabitate with others...learned about the resilience that I have. A lot of the situations in the military were definitely pretty scary at times, and I sometimes dig back to those moments when I'm having a hard time in my life now." Myra learned about how to live by putting their values first, which helped to lead them into intentional community: "I think what the military gave me...is kind of this values-driven mindset. I don't think I would have had that quite so strongly outside of, you know, having served in the military, and so I might not have been as intentional about searching out a place that had...some concrete values."

This emphasis on values is just one example of the connection between life in the military and life in IC. Given the other parallels, we asked the interviewees if veterans make for good communitarians. Every answer was some variation of "it depends."

On the one hand, strong characteristics of good communitarians can be found among veterans, such as being motivated by selfless service, following decisions you may not agree with because you understand the greater purpose of the whole, being able to work well under pressure, and working well with a diverse group of people. Cedric explains: "coming from the military like you're highly organized and you, like, want structure and you want diversity of thought and you want like all these different ranges of thinking." Indeed, the immersive experience and structured lifestyle of both the military and IC provides the potential for veterans to thrive as communitarians. Interviewees also described both as a source of familial attachment, illustrating their ability and desire to deepen community.

On the other hand, not every veteran would naturally fit into an IC. Veterans can be more committed to a "conventional" or "mainstream" lifestyle, which aligns with the reason they enlisted in the first place. We asked our interviewees how they would explain IC life to the people they served with, and very commonly their answers would reflect that veterans in the US take on more individualistic tendencies post-service so they would not be well suited for such a lifestyle. Beyond personal preference, mental health challenges that veterans often face can make communal living difficult, and ICs often do not have the capacity to support them appropriately.

Where does that leave us? Our hope is that this research helps to ground civilians, and ICs specifically, in the reality of the veteran experience and the valuable potential they hold for ICs. Some interviewees spoke about the bias they have encountered against them from ICs. Myra reflected: "It's easy to assume that people who are in the military are all sort of right wing, you know, supporting maybe values that don't align with community values...and I don't think that's true. In my experience, like yes, there are some people like that in the military, but there are plenty of others who come from all walks of life and have all kinds of ideas."

Who are veterans and what do they care most about? How might they play a vital part in your community? What barriers exist in your community that might prevent veterans from joining? How might you connect to the strong desire to serve prevalent in veterans and necessary for good communitarians? We invite you to question, and continue questioning, your own preconceived notions about military veterans and their role in the IC movement. ❧

Avi Kruley thrives in the liminal magic of transitions as a Facilitator of Change for The Next Big Step. She has been a passionate player in the world of IC for over a decade, and currently lives in a small IC she founded in Oakland focused on sacred living. See nextbigstep.org/avi.

Zach Rubin is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Lander University in South Carolina. He is a two-time winner of the Communal Studies Association's outstanding article award for his academic papers on Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage and measuring success in intentional communities. There are so few ICs where he lives, which is why he seeks out awesome research partners like Avi and Sky for projects like these.

Sky Blue has been deeply embedded in the IC Movement for over 25 years as an activist, organizer, consultant, and dedicated communitarian. See incommunity.us. For Sky's open letter to the intentional communities movement (January 2024), see incommunity.us/where-do-we-go-from-here.

Internalized Capitalism and Intentional Communities

By Dave Booda

Just down the dirt road from our community in San Diego County is a woman named Kelly who raises chickens and pigs. One day she asked me if we wanted eggs from her chickens and I said "absolutely," so she brought over a few dozen. I asked "how much?" and she said $3/dozen so I insisted on paying her $4/dozen. Pretty soon, the word got out about the farm-fresh eggs on the cheap and Kelly's eggs were in high demand. Two dozen a week quickly became four, and now our community is up to eight dozen a week.

Kelly is now our egg vending machine, except that she's not. Kelly doesn't have a set schedule for when she delivers her eggs. It's usually every week, but sometimes she goes eight or nine days in between deliveries, sometimes she brings seven dozen instead of eight, sometimes there are duck eggs, sometimes turkey eggs, she doesn't always respond to texts right away, etc.… In other words, Kelly isn't a very good vending machine, yet we are very happy about the fact that her eggs are super local, and only cost $4/dozen vs. $8/dozen at the actual egg vending machines (i.e. supermarkets). We get to choose. We can have Kelly and her inconsistencies at $4/dozen, or we can have supermarkets and the hassles that come with that at $8/dozen. What we cannot have is Kelly's eggs with vending machine expectations, yet that's what might happen if we're not careful.

> The game of capitalism essentially boils down to a mindset of "get yours," and it's a game played by both sides.

Internalized capitalism, meet community. Capitalism informs how we think about economic transactions, so whether it's Amazon, Walmart, or our neighbor Kelly, we unconsciously assume a set of beliefs. We see everything as a vending machine and our ability to pay as the only thing we need to feel entitled to a given service or product. This is an appropriate assumption when it comes to big companies such as Walmart, but when applied to someone like Kelly or interactions within an intentional community it often breaks down.

Capitalism and Exploitation

If I'm shopping online at Amazon.com and I find a workaround that gives me a lower price, I'll take it. Even if that method is a glitch in the system, or an unfair advantage, most people (including myself) will use that to get a better price without hesitation. The same goes in reverse. If big companies can charge a higher price and the customer will pay it, they will do it with no regard for whether they could feasibly offer that product at a lower price and still meet their financial needs. The game of capitalism essentially boils down to a mindset of "get yours," often by whatever means necessary, and

If we’re not careful, one person’s selfishness will drag the whole group down with it.

it’s a game played by both sides.

But what happens when this “get yours” mindset is consciously or unconsciously brought into a community? A better question is, what happens when there is an imbalance of “sharkey-ness,” meaning one person is playing the “get yours” game and one person is playing the “everyone wins” game? No one wins, and everyone loses. The “everyone wins” person will get taken advantage of, and the relationship will turn sour, often over a paltry sum of money or terms of negotiation.

My relationship to Target doesn’t matter, yet my relationship to the people in my community is critical to my well-being. I can take advantage of Amazon, or be taken advantage of, and it won’t affect my personal life or my close relationships because it’s an isolated system. Intentional communities are not, because everything and everyone is connected. What goes around, comes around.

Furthermore, when someone shows up to negotiate from a “get yours” mindset, there’s not much we can do to take things in a different direction. In my experience, internalized capitalism is just that—internal. It’s not a choice. Trying to suggest another way can feel like offering an alternative to gravity. Additionally, when someone is playing the game of capitalism and I’m trying to play the game of “let’s do what’s best for everyone,” I’m susceptible to getting taken advantage of. It’s like bringing a hug to a gunfight.

As much as it may hurt our hearts, often our only option in those scenarios is to come with a “get yours” mindset as well, yet this elevation in competition has a negative ripple effect. Selfish behavior can start a chain reaction, and quickly turn a culture of abundance into a culture of scarcity. It’s the reason so many indigenous groups went to great lengths to nip selfishness in the bud, because they saw how it could create a downward spiral and ruin everything. This is why communities reckoning with internalized capitalism is so important, because if we’re not careful, one person’s selfishness will drag the whole group down with it.

I’d like to share some more ideas about how internalized capitalism plays out and doesn’t play out in intentional communities, but first it’s important to acknowledge that for some people and communities this wisdom is innate, and they already get the joke.

I come from upper-middle class suburbs of Boston, so adjusting to life in a rural intentional community was a reorientation of my conscious and unconscious values. I imagine this is true for many folks who move to intentional communities, and what I’ve also noticed is some people take longer than others to adjust, and that can cause tension and stress in the community, due to the reasons I mentioned earlier in the essay.

Thank You for Your Service

In the default market, the flow of gratitude goes from seller to buyer. Customers get praised for their consumption. When we walk into a department store we feel like royalty because we have the almighty purchase power. In a more communal environment, the gratitude is often reversed. Instead of money at the center, it’s the service provided that we ought to be grateful for.

In my example of Kelly and her eggs, our community shows gratitude for the service she offers. By asking $3/dozen for farm fresh eggs that get delivered to our doorstep, she is being generous with us, and we understandably want to be generous in return. Last month Kelly mentioned that she had to repair a fence because some predators got in and killed some of her chickens. In response, I offered some of our labor to help mend fences if she ever needed it. We have eight people and 16 hands, and I knew she could use the help. Under normal “rules” of capitalism, I could have offered our services at a cost (it’s valuable, after all), yet we can see how that could quickly spiral downward. An offer like that would be totally justified in the default market, yet it would be completely uncalled for in a communal environment.

Transparency and Trust

In a “get yours” mindset, showing people your costs and being transparent is a bad idea. If your goal is to make as much profit as possible, then you would hide those figures, or maybe even lie about them to gain advantage. In a communal economy, transparency builds the trust needed to make sure everyone wins.

When I’m selling something in a community environment, I start by sharing my personal costs, and I’m transparent about the time, money, and effort that went into what I'm selling. I want the person I'm negotiating with to understand that I'm attempting to find a deal that works for both of us, so showing them my numbers is a means to that end. A good example of this on a larger scale is Mark Cuban's new project, costplusdrugs.com. I swear I'm not being paid to promote this, I just really appreciate the approach he is taking to rebuild trust in a market that has been riddled by deception. His company breaks down the price of medication into the manufacturing cost, pharmacy labor, and a 15 percent markup. Every drug he sells shows that math. It's beautiful, and simple. Transparency builds trust.

If It Were Easy, Everyone Would Do It

If it wasn't obvious by now, there are challenges to a communal approach, versus a default capitalism approach. We need the ability to know our boundaries, to have difficult conversations, and to welcome people into our lives beyond an over-the-counter interaction with them. We need people skills, and for many people those people skills have atrophied to a point where we would rather work more and pay extra to avoid other people.

At the end of the day, Kelly isn't just not becoming our egg vending machine, she's becoming our friend, because that's how this works. Today I visited her property to pick up eggs, and spent time with her sister while our dogs played together. Soon we might be inviting her over for the holidays and bringing her chicken soup when she gets sick.

For older generations, these kinds of high-touch service providers was all they knew. They didn't have a food delivery app, so having a relationship with the baker who made the bread, and the plumber who fixed the sink, was just part of life. It's what everyone did. All of these services were people, not apps, and the relationships we had with them were real and often meaningful.

I was fortunate to grow up with a father who had an innate understanding of community-centered living. He was always nurturing relationships and being of service to his local community. He would even treat the person collecting tolls on a highway as a friend, back when that was a job done by a person too.

I'll be honest that I wasn't sure if writing this essay was even worth it, because this is so painfully obvious to many people, and yet—it's becoming less and less common. Our grandparents weren't any more moral than us, they just had fewer options. As time has gone on and new opportunities for avoiding people have presented themselves, we've taken them. We are independence hoarders, and when given the chance for more privacy, more independence, or more autonomy, we scoop it up, no matter the cost.

Intentional communities are a natural boundary for some of the capitalist habits in mainstream culture that are slowly eroding our collective and individual well-being, so I hope that through increased awareness of our internalized capitalism we can continue to hold the line and create our own little micro-cultures of care, generosity, and consideration for everyone. ❧

This article was inspired by an important piece by Sky Blue called "Intentional Communities and Capitalism" that I read several times. You can see it at incommunity.us/intentional-communities-and-capitalism.

Dave Booda is a writer (see booda-ism.com), musician, and social entrepreneur. He is the cofounder of Intimacy Fest (intimacyfest.com) and hosts The Darkness Experiment (darknessexperiment.com). 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 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 while living at a community in rural San Diego County.

Intentional communities can be a natural boundary for some of the capitalist habits in mainstream culture that are slowly eroding our collective and individual well-being.

Chris Roth

Consensus and Sociocracy—Explained

By Jerry Koch-Gonzalez and Ted Rau

There are two big participatory governance systems in the world of intentional communities: whole-group consensus and sociocracy (a.k.a. Dynamic Governance). There are a lot of opinions and experiences on the difference, and this article is an attempt to give an honest and nuanced summary of our experiences.

For disclosure, both authors live in a community that operated by whole-group consensus for 18 years before adopting sociocracy 12 years ago. Jerry used to teach consensus for years, and now teaches sociocracy (and Nonviolent Communication). Both Ted and Jerry work with dozens of communities in the US and Canada through Sociocracy For All.

So what is the difference between whole-group consensus and sociocracy? To really understand, we need to separate out two questions:

- How do we decide? (consensus vs. consent)
- Who decides what? (whole-group vs. circles)

To make that clear, let's look at two extreme versions:

Consensus-run community: The community holds the value of doing things together. While there might be committees on some aspects of the community, decisions are made together in monthly meetings. In those meetings, everyone comes together and talks. A decision can only move forward when all people agree.

- How do we decide: consensus
- Who decides what: everyone decides everything together

Community with Dynamic Governance: The community has committees ("circles") of four to eight people who meet regularly and focus on a particular aspect of the community; for example, a Garden Circle, a Finance Circle, with a Coordinating Circle (a.k.a. General Circle) in the center to distribute decision-making authority. Decisions themselves are made in circles, not in whole-community meetings. Decisions are made by consent, meaning not everyone needs to agree—it's enough if no circle member objects.

- How do we decide: consent (no objections)
- Who decides what: circles in their respective domains

Let's look at those two topics separately.

1. How do we make decisions: consensus vs. consent

What's the difference between consensus and consent? The answer to this question highly depends on what is meant by consensus. Let's start with an *oversimplified* explanation and then add more context:

- Consensus means a decision is made when everyone agrees.
- Consent means a decision is made when no one objects.

What's the difference between *agreeing* and *not objecting?* Let's look at an example. Let's say someone proposes to paint the walls in the basement. You might say, well, I would not have agreed with the statement that they *have to be* painted right now, but I'm also not against it. So if you ask me, "Do you agree that the basement should be painted?," I might say, "No." But if you ask me, "Are you against painting it?," I might also say no, and then it's fine to go ahead. In short, there might be proposals that I don't necessarily agree with, but I'm also not against them.

Now the confusion between consent and consensus happens because there are different ways to practice consensus. Either it's exactly like consent—people give their blessing to things just because they want to support other people's plans. Or it's closer to "people want what they want and say no to everything else." So maybe there's a difference for you, and maybe there isn't.

In consent, how do we define an objection? Let's look at another example. Let's say I have a hard time following conversations at our community meals. To reduce the noise level, I suggest to have smaller tables in the dining room of the common house. That way, we don't have to shout across the table and conversations can be more connecting. To seat everyone, we need to have more tables then. So the proposal is: smaller tables but more tables so people can hear each other better.

Yet someone objects, because more tables will mean common meals now require more serving bowls, which makes it harder on cooks. In other words, our shared value of supporting connection over food now clashes with the desire to support our cooks. Now creative solutions are needed.

What this example shows is that objections aren't the end of a proposal—more like the beginning of a conversation. Objections point out unintended consequences that we still need to consider and help us focus our conversations. And then we deal with those.

In addition, an objection is different from someone's personal agenda. That's a key difference: we don't say *no* to the proposal because of a personal issue. We say no to the proposal because it clashes with the needs of the community. In that way, the intention of consent is to shift the conversation from individual wants and desires towards group needs. The group needs are typically expressed in standing agreements (like policies) and the community's and circle's aim.

In consensus, of course, people might weigh different considerations as they decide whether to say yes or no to a proposal. They might base their decision entirely on the group's needs. And they might not. Depending on whether they do (and are expected to do so), consensus and consent might end up looking the same or different.

One last difference is that in consensus, it's not uncommon for people to abstain (stand aside). They might have concerns about the proposal, but they don't want to be in the way, so they don't block. (So technically, consensus means a decision is made when everyone agrees *or* stands aside.)

In consent decision-making, abstaining is not an option. Each decision-maker (see below) needs to decide whether they consent or object. The idea behind that is that we want decision-makers to be co-responsible. If you don't like it but you also don't see a reason for concern—that's consent. If you do see a problem for the community, we really do want to hear it—and that is what an objection is.

	Consensus	Consent
If you agree	consensus	consent
Not your preference	depends*	consent
If the proposal has unintended negative consequences	block	objection
Abstentions/standing aside	allowed	not allowed

(*depends on whether individuals will agree for the sake of the group; depends on facilitation and culture)

The difference between consensus and consent depends on the culture and style and on how much a community wants to prioritize individual needs compared to the group's needs.

2. *Who* makes decisions about what?

While the difference between consensus and consent can be a matter of culture, the most significant difference between Dynamic Governance/sociocracy and whole-group consensus is how authority gets distributed. It's important to distinguish between recommendations and final decision-making authority.

- In **whole-group consensus**, all (major) decisions are made by **everyone together**, often in a "general meeting." Committees in whole-group consensus systems often prepare proposals that then need to be approved at the all-member meeting.
- In **sociocracy** (Dynamic Governance), decisions are made in **small groups** called circles. While members outside of the circle might be asked for input, circles are designed to be final decision-makers.

	All members	Working group (circle)
Whole-group consensus	decision-making	recommendation/feedback
Sociocracy	recommendations/feedback	decision-making

In a sociocratic system, authority is "chunked" into smaller bits. Sociocracy uses the term "domain"[1] to describe what exactly a group has authority over. Any decision should fit into a domain so that there's clarity on what's decided where.

Those who attend those smaller circles are often involved in the operations of that circle; for example, the gardeners make decisions about the garden, and those tending to the community building will form the Common House Circle that makes decisions about the Common House. The word *sociocracy* actually means "*those who associate together decide*." This a key feature of sociocracy—putting the doing and the decision-making into the same people encourages alignment and helps decisions to be informed by direct experience.

This chunking of authority into domains implies that circles might make decisions autonomously that affect *everyone.* For example, a Cooks Circle might decide to raise the cost for meals by $0.50 based on their budget experience. This would affect *everyone's* meal prices, requiring good communication and trust between circles and community members. If the meal prices are in their domain, they can make that decision.

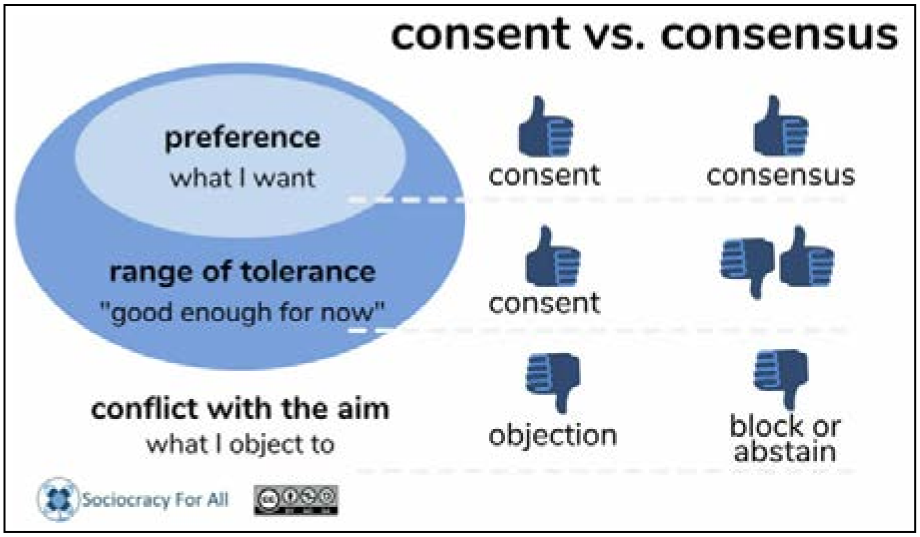
The circle in the middle, the Coordinating Circle, supports information flow between the circles and makes decisions about the domains of the circles. If it's unclear which circle tends to a question or if there is a shift in domains, the Coordinating Circle decides that. Since the Coordinating Circle consists of two people from each main circle and makes decisions by consent, this will only happen if there's alignment between all the circles that the change is useful.

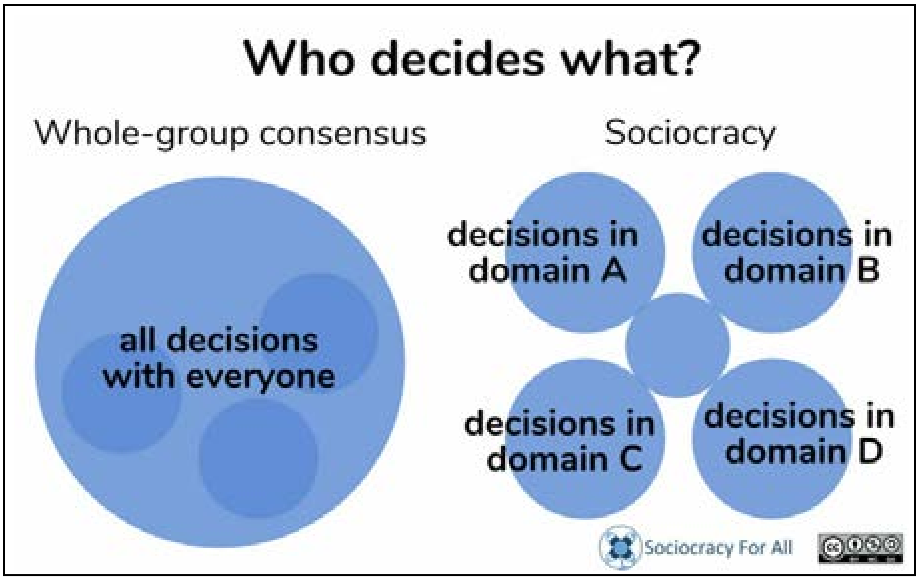
3. The role of all-member meetings

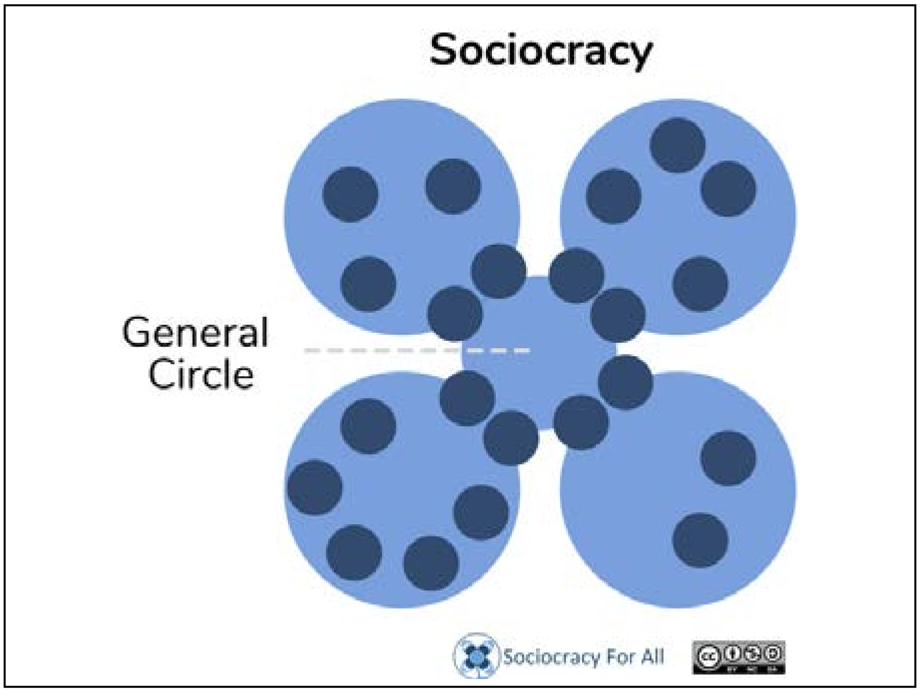
Sociocracy is more than a decision-making system with a circle structure. It also comes with other features, including a meeting format, rounds, a selection process, roles in circles, feedback processes, and a regular review of policies. Of course, groups can combine different practices with their use of either sociocracy or large-group consensus.

There's one particular "hybrid" form that needs special attention: the question of how much gets decided by circles/working groups, and how much gets decided by the all-member meeting.

In whole-group consensus, the General Meeting is the hub for everything. It's where decisions are made, progress is reported, and people connect with each other. In communities using sociocracy/Dynamic Governance, an all-member meeting might still be a common practice. Its use is then for connection, education, and feedback to circles on their decisions. Connection means time for sharing life stories or our responses to the state of the world or play and celebration. If there are legal requirements (as in a condominium association), the all-member meeting might have to make decisions on certain things—such as the budget. That leads to a hybrid version of sociocracy.







Yet, from a sociocratic view (and certainly the authors' view), it's important to distribute as much of the decision-making into circles as possible. Why? Because the quality of conversation is bigger in a smaller group. It can be paralyzing and discouraging for a community when an important decision can't be made, and the issue remains unresolved with no way forward.

For example, in our community, the outdoor cat policy had been a contentious issue for 15 years, and no resolution had been able to be approved in the all-member meeting. The community was split—about half of the members wanted no outdoor cats, and the other half wanted no restriction on cats. It was clear that no decision could satisfy everyone.

After switching from large-group consensus to sociocracy, the decision-making power shifted to a small group of six. That circle now hosted several community discussions, then crafted a proposal, and got feedback from the community until the circle of six finally approved a new policy. Although the decision was not many people's preferred solution, the community was greatly relieved that a decision had been made. Finally having clarity calmed the issue down. In the 10 years since approval of that policy, there have not been any conflicts about cats.

We're telling this story because it's a good example of how erring on the side of inclusivity ("everyone should decide together") can lead to non-decisions which then—ironically and sadly—aren't helpful or inclusive either.

Summary

We hope that in this article we have shown that the difference between consensus and sociocracy cannot be reduced to the difference between consensus and consent, or "everyone decides" vs. "small groups decide." Many processes and systems—including rounds, agendas shared with the larger group in advance, terms/timelines for decisions, role selection methods, and the use of the all-member meetings—contribute to an interdependent system that balances inclusion, getting things done, connection, and resources; and these processes and systems themselves likely need to be reviewed and fine-tuned from time to time. ❧

	Whole-group consensus	Dynamic Governance/sociocracy
Decision-making method	Consensus	Consent
Who decides what	All decisions are made together	Circles decide in their domain
Circles/committees	Prepare proposals to be approved by the all-member meeting	Make policy decisions in their domain
Role of the all-member meeting	Decision-making Connection	Feedback to circles Connection Education (in exceptional cases: Decisions)
Meeting methods/ protocols	(depends)	Following rounds, and sociocratic meeting format

Jerry Koch-Gonzalez has been a certified sociocracy consultant since 2012. With his partner Ted Rau, he cofounded Sociocracy For All in 2016 and published the book Many Voices One Song: Shared Power with Sociocracy *in 2018. Jerry is also a certified Nonviolent Communication trainer since 2008 and lives in the Cherry Hill Cohousing community in Amherst, Massachusetts, US.*

Ted Rau is an advocate, trainer, and consultant for self-governance. His main focus is sociocracy. After his PhD in linguistics and work in Academia, he cofounded the membership organization Sociocracy For All (sociocracyforall.org). Ted spends his days consulting with mission-driven organizations, teaching, and deeply immersed in the work as a member within Sociocracy For All. Ted identifies as a transgender man; he has five children between 10 and 20. A German citizen, he has lived in Massachusetts since 2010. He is (co)author of three books on self-governance, Many Voices One Song *(sociocracyforall.org/many-voices-one-song-2)(2018),* Who Decides Who Decides *(sociocracyforall.org/who-decides-who-decides-resource-page) (2021), and* Collective Power *(sociocracyforall.org/collective-power)(2023), and working on a book on the interface between governance and wisdom.*

---

1. See sociocracyforall.org/clarity-and-empowerment-what-is-a-domain.

REACH

REACH is our column for all your Classified needs: ads intended to match people looking for communities with communities looking for people, plus ads for events, land, internships, services, books, personals, and more. To place an ad, contact our Advertising Manager, Joyce Bressler, at ads@gen-us.net or 845-558-4492, or go to gen-us.net/advertising for more information.

THE REACH DEADLINE FOR ISSUE #205 Winter 2024 (out in Dec.) is Oct. 31, 2024. Rates: ≤50 words: $25/issue; ≤100 words: $50/issue; ≤150 words: $75/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

LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE WANTED FOR AN INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY ON AN ORGANIC LAKEFRONT FARM IN THE WILDERNESS OF BC CANADA. More info: https://www.canadianwildernessproperties.com, Hans@canada-farm-ranch.com, or phone 001 250 694 3417.

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 $950 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

DURHAM COHOUSING Thriving established cohousing community has a large unit available, Fall 2024. Multigenerational, active members enjoy urban vibrancy in downtown and quiet peace in our gardens. We appreciate sharing weekly meals, working together, and having meaningful conversations, as neighbors and friends. Contact us: durhamcoho407@gmail.com Visit us: www.durhamcoho.com

SERVICES/OPPORTUNITIES/PRODUCTS

MEET YOUR ECO-CONSCIOUS, GREEN MATCH ON GREENSINGLES.COM. No superficial swiping. In-Depth Profiles and Amazing Members! Compatibility Percentages, Video Chatting and More. We provide our Members with Fabulous Tools to Meet their Ideal Match. Join the Oldest, Largest, Dating Site for "Green" Singles. Your Success is our Joy and Passion! www.GreenSingles.com

WHY PAY RENT/MORTGAGE PAYMENTS when you can live rent free? We publish 1,000+ property caretaking and house-sitting opportunities, worldwide, each year. We cover all 50 states and overseas. Online subscription: $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

BEST-SELLING BOOK: Together We Decide, An Essential Guide for Good Group Decisions, by Craig Freshley. I'm a career meeting facilitator and I've lived in a cohousing community for 25 years. If you are reading this magazine, I wrote the book to help YOU and your group. Wherever books are sold.

SAGEWOMAN magazine, celebrating the Goddess in Every Woman, is still going strong after 30 years. WITCHES & PAGANS magazine covers Pagan, Wiccan, Heathen, and Polytheist people, places, and practice. 88 pages, print or digital (PDF). Mention this Communities ad for a free sample. 503-430-8817, P O Box 687, Forest Grove, OR, 97116. www.bbimedia.com

CONSCIOUS GROWTH CONVERGENCE is a three-day transformative gathering happening at Lost Valley Education Center, Dexter, OR, September 27th-29th, 2024, co-produced by Reciprocity Music & Conscious Growth. For 2024, our theme is "Building Bridges of Reciprocity," representing our commitment to celebrate culture and support solidarity. Visit consciousgrowthconvergence.org.

GROUP PROCESS RESOURCES AT EFFECTIVE COLLECTIVE.NET – Kavana Tree Bressen's site offers free handouts and articles on topics such as consensus, facilitation, communication skills, conflict, and more!

UPCOMING ONLINE TRAININGS WITH CHARLES DURRETT

Designing Community-Enhanced Neighborhoods: The Architecture of Cohousing

August 7, 14, 21, 28, 2024

Affordable & Energy Efficient Cohousing

September 3,10,17, 2024

How to Address Homelessness in Your Town

October 4 & 11, 2024

Join us for these online continuing education courses with Charles Durrett, leading architect in cohousing & sustainable design.

To sign up, visit: cohousingco.com/events

The Cohousing Company ANTIOCH UNIVERSITY

Earthaven Ecovillage

Looking for inspiration, skills, connection, and community?

- In-person **classes**
- Online **workshops**
- In-person or virtual **tours**

The Re-membering Retreat: Sept. 26-29

Working with Community Conflict (online) September

See and experience:

Food production in action • Regenerative systems in practice

Community living on a personal level

earthaven.org schoolofintegratedliving.org

Are you looking for a community...

...that's about connecting people to each other and our natural environment?

...that's adjacent to a university campus?

...that's multi-generational and inclusive?

...that respects everyone's voice and time?

Join us at Rachel Carson EcoVillage!

At Providence Heights, a half-hour from downtown Pittsburgh in beautiful western Pennsylvania.

We're moving in next year - some units are available.

www.rachelcarsonecovillage.org - 412-441-2948

INSIDE COMMUNITY podcast

Season 2

Exploring the *beautiful* and *messy* realities of living in community.

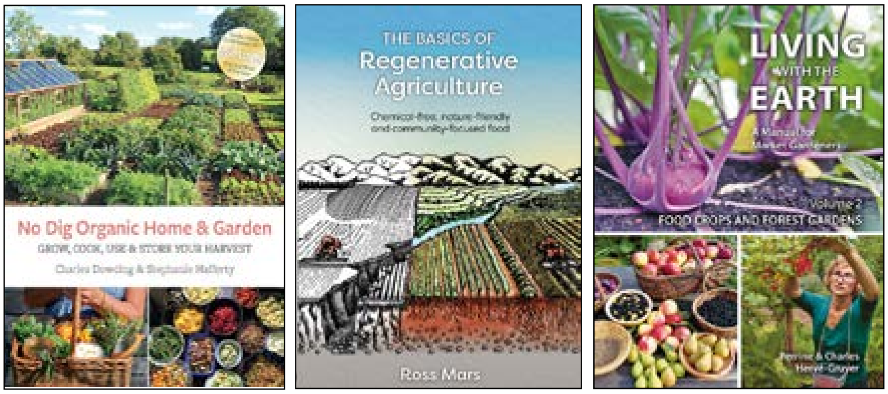
This season we examine raising children, aging & death, thoughtful placemaking, sex & relationships, and *so much more!*

ic.org/podcast

or your favorite listening app

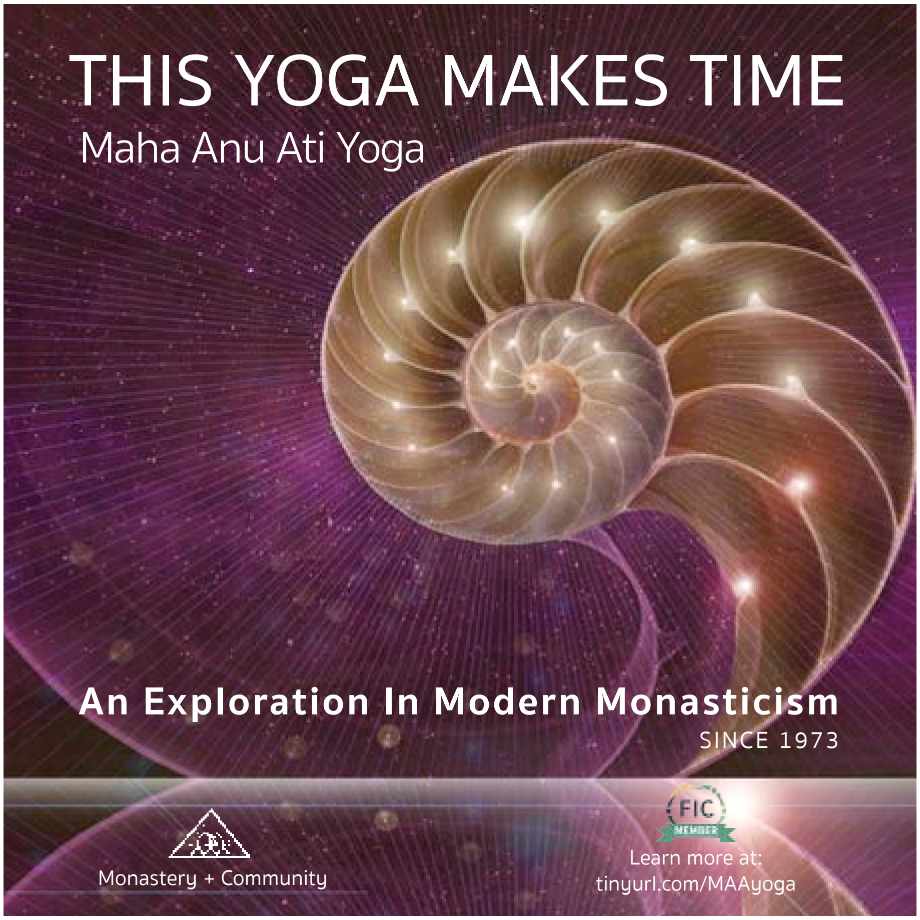
FOUNDATION FOR INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

WITH REBECCA MESRITZ


No Dig Organic Home & Garden
GROW, COOK, USE & STORE YOUR HARVEST
Charles Dowding & Stephanie Hafferty
THE BASICS OF Regenerative Agriculture
Chemical-free, nature-friendly and community-focused food
Ross Mars
LIVING WITH THE EARTH
A Manual for Market Gardeners
Volume 2
FOOD CROPS AND FOREST GARDENS
Perrine & Charles Hervé-Gruyer


BUILDING BELONGING
Your Guide to Starting a Residential Intentional Community
Yana Ludwig
BUILDING BELONGING

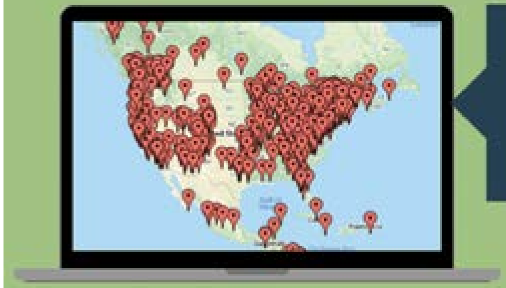

Welcome Friends Neighbors



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

Check out the online hub for intentional communities!

Explore our online directory, download free resources, join virtual workshops and more.

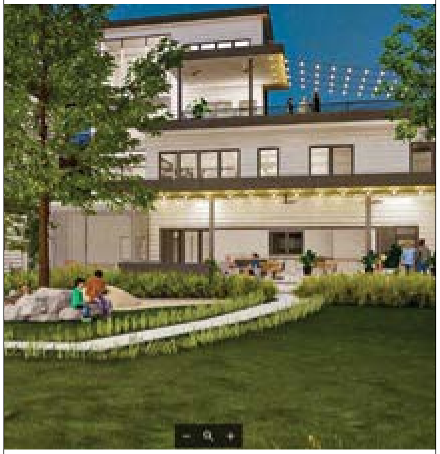


Come visit us at

ic.org/cmag

FOUNDATION FOR INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

COHOUSING HOUSTON



WE ARE . . .
creating a multigenerational urban village in Houston, Texas. We are community-minded neighbors who share the values of connection and sustainability.

2024 MOVE IN

Come to one of our info sessions!
www.cohousinghouston.com

Rent or Own a cabin in a 100 year old vacation community

Loch Lyme Lodge

Lyme, NH

Rustic cabins with private waterfront
Members get early bird access plus discounts
Owners get cabin use plus profit share
a partner of Pinnacle Cohousing
115 acres of recreation & fun
12 miles from Hanover, NH

Since 1923

LochLymeLodge.com • 603-795-2141

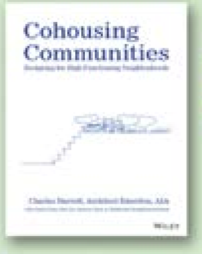
Perfect for families. We have 4 buildable lots available in rural Adams County PA. Hundredfold Farm Cohousing Community, located 8 miles west of historic Gettysburg, PA, nestled within 80 acres of collectively owned fields and forest. Join like-minded people who are dedicated to finding ways to be resilient and sustainable in an uncertain world.

IMAGINE…
- The security of knowing your neighbors.
- Living with a solar energy efficient home.
- Living with your children in a safe supportive multi-generational community.
- Experiencing the beauty of nature and learning to appreciate the changes.

CONTACT US: **http://hundredfoldfarm.org**
info@hundredfoldfarm.org

COHOUSING COMMUNITIES
DESIGNING FOR HIGH-FUNCTIONING NEIGHBORHOODS

A new book by architect Charles Durrett



Use code **ARC20** for **20% off** when ordered through Wiley!

To buy the book and find out more, visit:

www.TinyURL.com/CohousingDesign

See all our books, including one about the importance of **neuro-inclusive communities** at **www.cohousingco.com**

The Cohousing Company

SOUTHERN INDIANA
College of Liberal Arts

University of Southern Indiana
Center for Communal Studies

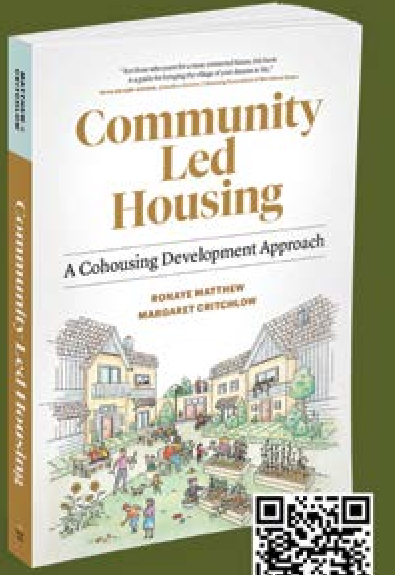
The Center for Communal Studies promotes the study of contemporary and historic communal groups, intentional communities and utopias. Established in 1976 at USI, the Center encourages and facilitates meetings, classes, scholarship, networking and public interest in communal groups past and present, here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

The Center's Collections hold primary and secondary materials on more than one hundred historic communes and several hundred collective, cooperative and co-housing communities founded since 1965. Noted communal scholars have donated their private collections and their extensive research notes and papers to the Center archives.

For more information, please contact Dr. Silvia Rode at sarode@usi.edu (812-465-7026), or consult https://www.usi.edu/liberal-arts/communal-center

New release!

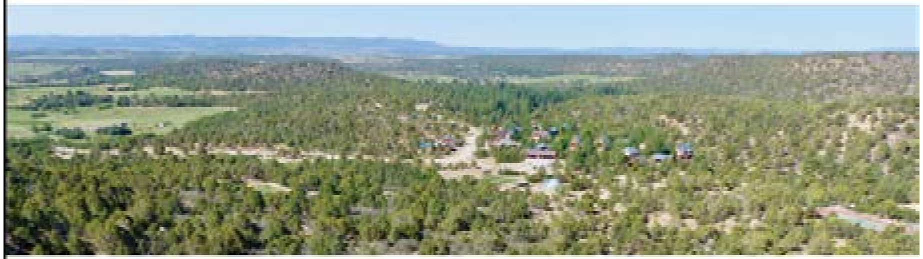
A step-by-step handbook for professionals and forming groups



communityledhousing.ca

Heartwood Cohousing

Where Community and Nature Come Together in Gorgeous SW Colorado



Heartwood is an established cohousing community (move-in was in 2000) that's adding a second phase of 14 new homes in 2025. 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.

We only have a few spots left in Phase 2.
Learn all about Heartwood and Phase 2 at
www.heartwoodcohousing.com

The

Communal Studies Association

invites you to their *51st Annual*

Conference

Oct. 3–Oct. 5 2024

at

Ephrata Cloister
Ephrata, PA

Ephrata Cloister, Ephrata, PA

Learn from the past
Share your ideas and ideals
Engage with like-minded others
Special rates for community members

Find out more at our website: **www.communalstudies.org**

QUAKER CURIOUS?

Learn more about modern Friends at ***Quaker.org***

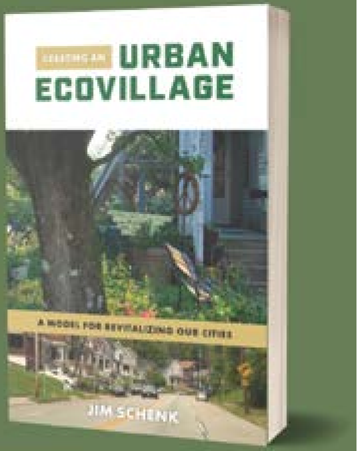
Watch short video interviews at ***QuakerSpeak.com***

Or dive deep into Friends Publishing with daily, weekly, and monthly ***Friends Journal*** articles in print and online at ***Friendsjournal.org***

Creating an Urban Ecovillage:
A Model for Revitalizing Our Cities

by Jim Schenk

Through the lens of Enright Ridge Urban Ecovillage, the book explores the plausible and practical aspects of the urban "retrofit" ecovillage as a means of achieving a harmonious coexistence between urban living and environmental preservation.



Order your copy today at
rjamesschenk.org/creating-an-urban-ecovillage/

For ecovillage consultations, interviews, speaker engagements
contact stephanie@communityearthalliance.org

YOUR AD HERE

1/6th page, 1/3rd page, full page or cover page

OUR READERS WANT TO KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE TO OFFER

Contact Joyce:
ads@gen-us.net
for ad sizes, rates and discounts.

POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT FOR INTROVERTS

(continued from p. 64)

how much, a notary can charge for their service. Depending on why someone needs notary service, they might not want to conduct that business in a public location where they might see someone they know and face awkward questions. In contrast, I offer free notary services available at any mutually agreeable time, including evenings, weekends, and on short notice, and by confidential, private appointment only.

Spotlight local politics. On my local-focused social media, I share the boring-but-important aspects of local politics on a regular basis—who's running for school board, the dates of the warrant forgiveness program, proposed zoning changes, changes to the school district zone lines, when is the deadline to register to vote, where do we vote, what's the schedule for early voting, what are the propositions and their full text, when/where is the town hall to meet candidates, and more. It's easy to get discouraged about voting at the state or federal level, but local participation can have a real and immediate impact on my daily life. A few years ago, two proposals were offered to the people of our city to consider. One was to have a federal prison built in our small rural town and the other was to clearcut many acres of forest near the middle of town, to build college-sized softball fields with stadium lighting and parking lots to match. It felt good to help even in a behind-the-scenes way by posting information about meetings, events, details of the propositions, and voting information.

Vote. Voting is easier than ever, with early voting, mail-in, and even online options increasingly available, and all methods require only a small bit of interaction with anyone. I vote every chance I get, not just for the big one of President, but also for the ones that directly affect where I live, such as school board and city, county, or state elections. Voting lets me influence change and helps policymakers get a sense of where the group stands on specific issues. Returning to the previous example, both the federal prison and the softball field were voted down by our local community. Instead, we now have a beautiful trail system through the woods and no federal prison (or the jobs that were promised to come with it). Another city might vote for the prison (and probably did) which is the beauty of the process—each governing community makes their own decisions. I also vote to honor the historical figures who did so much to provide that opportunity for me as well as the people worldwide who still today don't have this way to participate in their own political systems, for various reasons.

Speak up (or text it, more likely). When someone in my circle shares or says something that seems extreme, I fact-check from several sources to get a better sense of the whole picture and then pick one small aspect of the issue that is reasonably easy to objectively point out as mis/disinformation. One example was the situation of President Biden mentioning the Transgender Day of Visibility on Easter. Some people close to me were truly enraged that he would "invent such a day and put it on Easter!" None of that seemed likely to me, and it didn't take long to find a credible source that explained the history of the day. I sent a short text: "from what I'm reading, that's been a well-established day of recognition for many years. It just happened to fall on Easter this year," along with a link to a related article for verification. Even if the conversation doesn't go any further, the reminder of the importance of fact-checking in today's partisan click-bait world is still made. A big bonus of this approach has been to myself, for how much I've learned about many different issues.

Or don't. When the topic is a settled matter that I know I won't change any minds about, I sometimes don't try. The act of silent, attentive listening while someone shares an opinion you equally vehemently disagree with is the challenging first step towards finding any common ground at all. Sometimes I'm left with only the bare bones of "I disagree with you about this but still love you" and sometimes that has to be enough. ❧

Elizabeth Barr is a freelance writer who also does bookwork such as simple bindings and basic restorations. For info about her various projects, please visit www.BigThicketBooks.com (and also on Facebook).

Political Engagement for Introverts

By Elizabeth Barr

Chris Roth

For a long time, I felt helpless about political engagement. Big changes were happening all around me, decisions were being made that affected my life, and there didn't seem to be anything I could do about any of it. I don't want to march in big crowds of protesters, I'm not about to consider running for political office of any sort, I'm not entirely comfortable talking to strangers, even on the phone, and I surely will never be the one who goes knocking door-to-door to hand out fliers or offer petitions to sign. Over time, though, I've found a few ways to engage that give me the opportunity to do useful work and be helpful, but not feel stressed out. Note that I'm in Texas (US), so I'm only speaking from my experience there.

Voter Registrar. Voter registration is a hot topic, but currently it is still required in order to vote, and this is a meaningful way I have found to participate in the political process. In Texas, the first step is completing a one page, very short form, but finding time even for that in a life busy with work, school, kids, pets, errands, and everything else can be hard. To make this step as convenient as possible, I went to the training to be a registrar (no special skills are needed, just one hour, one evening, and that was it), and now keep an envelope with the forms with me so that I'm ready when the topic comes up. "I have the form with me so you can do it right now if you want to" is empowering to be able to say.

Jury Duty. I don't have control over if or when I'm called to the jury pool or selected, but I can take control of how I talk, so I make a real effort to be intentional in my speech. Instead of bemoaning jury "duty" as a burden, I use language like "jury service" or "the opportunity to serve on a jury." When I have been selected, I embraced the opportunity to learn as much as I could about another aspect of the political system, even though that much interaction was a stretch for me. Fully engaged jurors play a vital role against tyranny and injustice at a personal, immediate level with far-reaching effects.

Local Newspaper Subscription. The power and importance of a free, independent, local press can hardly be overstated, and the small cost of a subscription to my local newspaper is well worth it to me to support freedom of the press. I have also written many Letters to the Editor on various topics. Finally, I extend this outreach by donating the newspapers to the animal shelter when I'm done with them.

Notary Public. By keeping my notary public commission current, I am able to reduce barriers for other people, such as availability, costs, and confidentiality. Banks or tax businesses often offer notary services, but they are usually open only during "regular business hours." State laws vary quite a bit on if, or

(continued on p. 63)

Visit lostvalley.org

LOST VALLEY

EDUCATION CENTER

HELP CREATE A REGENERATIVE FUTURE

PERMACULTURE EDUCATION

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.

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 or learning period, and are looking to make like-minded friends, develop marketable skills, and experience living in community. Food and lodging included.

EXPERIENCE LIVING IN A COMMUNITY

EXPLORE A HOLISTIC LIFE PATH

RESIDENCY

Community can teach us to care for and respect one another, communicate compassionately, make decisions together, and see our individual needs in the context of the whole, while also reducing resource use through sharing. Staff and students live in community in apartments, cabins, and tiny homes. Sociocratic decision-making, shared meals, and shared activities are a regular part of life at Lost Valley!

Subscribe to COMMUNITIES!

What Readers Say about COMMUNITIES

I love COMMUNITIES magazine. I've read and kept every issue since 1972. Deciding to be communal is the best decision I've ever made in my life. COMMUNITIES has been there from the beginning.

—**Patch Adams**, M.D., author and founder of the Gesundheit Institute

Our mission at *Utne Reader* is to search high and low for new ideas and fresh perspectives that aim to start conversations and cure ignorance. To that end, COMMUNITIES has become one of our go-to sources for thought-provoking pieces about people opting out of the rat race and living life on their own terms. We're pleased to share the voices we come across in COMMUNITIES with our readers because they remind us all of the virtue of cooperation and the world-changing potential of coexistence.

—**Christian Williams**, Editor, *Utne Reader*

I've been subscribing to COMMUNITIES for over a decade. Each issue is a refreshing antidote to the mainstream media's "me, me, me" culture. COMMUNITIES overflows with inspiring narratives from people who are making "we" central to their lives instead.

—**Murphy Robinson**, Founder of Mountainsong Expeditions

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

—**Chuck Durrett**, The Cohousing Company

COMMUNITIES mentors me with real human stories and practical tools: networking, research, and decades of archives that nourish, support, and encourage evolving wholesome collaborations. The spirit and writings have helped guide me to recognize and contribute to quality community experiences wherever I am. The magazine is an irreplaceable resource and stimulus during the times when community disappears and isolation/withdrawal looms; and an inspiration and morale booster when I am once again engaged with intentional and committed group work.

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

See gen-us.net/subscribe.

To subscribe via online payment, please visit gen-us.net/online.

To renew your subscription online or update your address, please log in at gen-us.net/account.

To subscribe via postal mail, send a **check or money order payable to COMMUNITIES Magazine** along with name, address, city, state, zip code, country, email address, phone (optional), subscription type(s), start issue requested (current or next) for each subscription, and addresses/contact info for any gift recipients, to: **Communities, c/o Roths, 330 Morgan St., Oberlin, OH 44074 USA.**

SUBSCRIPTION RATES

Print + Digital: $30 per year in US, $25 for each additional in US; $40 per year outside of US, $35 per year for each additional outside of US. **Print + Digital, Supporter:** $40 in US, $50 per year outside of US. **Print + Digital, Sustainer:** $50 per year in US, $60 per year outside of US.

Digital Only: $20 per year anywhere in world, $15 for each additional. **Digital Only, Supporter:** $30 per year anywhere in world. **Digital Only, Sustainer:** $40 per year anywhere in world.

Bonus: every subscription, print + digital or digital only, also includes **access to all digital back and current issues** for online viewing and/or download.

gen-us.net/subscribe

PLEASE EXPLORE OUR PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS!

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!

MORE WAYS TO PARTICIPATE

Donate to COMMUNITIES:
gen-us.net/donate/magazine
Become a Benefactor:
gen-us.net/visions and
gen-us.net/reach
Submit writing, photography, artwork:
gen-us.net/submit
Advertise:
gen-us.net/advertising
Explore past content:
gen-us.net/back-issues,
gen-us.net/themes,
gen-us.net/index,
gen-us.net/index-by-community