

SPIRAL DYNAMICS • BOUNDARY CIRCLES • 2060 HINDSIGHT

COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

Spring 2025 • Issue #206

\$10 US / \$13 Canada

ECOVILLAGE VISIONS



Initiations into Adulthood
Reflections on Biosphere 2
The Role of Transition Towns
Cooperative Futures Imagined
The Direct Drive DC Microgrid

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Themes and Dreams

Chris Roth

Every issue of COMMUNITIES starts out as the germ of an idea. Perhaps more accurate, each begins as a packet of garden- and wild-harvested seeds which have gotten a little mixed up in the sorting and may also have cross-pollinated, and among which, moreover, some are viable and some may never sprout (or might not sprout until conditions are right, a year or a decade later). In other words, we never know what we are going to get when we announce a theme and send out article prompts. Yet after a half-year gestation, we can be confident we'll have a fascinating issue, however clear or mysterious the origin of its constituent DNA.

"Ecovillage Visions" is no different. In fact, it's almost an extreme case of this same unpredictability. Our deliberately broad prompts resulted in equally broad responses. Readers looking for a compendium of descriptions of the physical characteristics of future ecovillages may be a little disappointed, though some articles herein do deal with material details. Anyone hoping for an exclusive focus on the narrower definitions of Ecovillage may also be disappointed. Readers looking for either the strictly visible or the strictly visionary may need to look elsewhere. But those seeking a more holistic, fractal take on what our present and future may hold—"soft" as well as "hard" skills, strategies, and perspectives that can aid our species to navigate into necessarily more cooperative ways of living on our home planet—will find a wealth of instructive, useful, and inspiring writing in this issue. Perusing the Table of Contents or simply flipping through the pages will reveal more.

"Breaking the Spell," our next theme, will address some of what may seem to be glaring omissions in this issue in light of news developments since "Across the Generations" went to press. That's if "Breaking the Spell" is allowed to go to press. By assiduously avoiding naming the names that would like to silence the alternative press, we hope to show up in your mailbox or inbox in Summer as well. Sometimes the unspoken but known does not need to be said at every opportunity. And sometimes common ground can emerge where gaping divides appear to exist. By focusing on constructive steps we all can take together in our own lives, and avoiding the paralysis that over-immersion in bad news can generate, we hope to help create the good news that may lift every boat, even if the occupants of some of those boats seem recently to have made some very poor electoral choices.

Occasionally things need to get worse before they can get better, but even as they get worse, we are not powerless to find a common humanity that may help address seemingly irresolvable problems in ways that we may never have anticipated nor encountered unless shaken out of some of our own assumptions and realities. Put another way: while the state of the world cannot be sugar-coated, when given lemons we can still make lemonade with the sweetener of our choice (I recommend organic maple syrup—see page 10).

Where There's a Will

COMMUNITIES continues to rely not only on support from a wide array of readers and advertisers, but also on generous donations from a subset of them, without which we would be unable to pay our production bills. We don't anticipate the economic landscape to become less challenging for alternative publications such as ours any time soon. Looking to the future, we see no end to the need and utility of the kinds of story-sharing that COMMUNITIES makes possible—accessible to anyone, at any point in time, and on the reader's own schedule, whether they are immersed in modern communication technologies or even avoid them completely.

While every other mode of communication also has its place, the written word al-

lows us to engage internally with content in ways that, for some, cannot be replicated in other forms—nor shared across time and space so effectively, regardless of outer circumstance or the state of civilizational and technological flourishing or collapse.

This goes for writers and readers alike—both can reach understandings and be spurred to action through this medium in ways that they (we) may not be by simply watching or making videos, or even by just having in-the-moment conversations with each other. Unique types of deliberation (combined with inspiration) can go into creating a story made of words—words that, together, are meant to stand on their own. Moreover, written words are available to be taken in at the pace that exactly suits each of us. Without access to those benefits of the written word, we may miss out on vital aspects of a story.

Not everyone finds this medium suits them. But enough people do, including many of those who do or will play key roles in spurring the positive changes we need, that it seems vital to keep it alive.

COMMUNITIES has already outlived a fair number of its essential contributors over the past five decades, and if we are fortunate it will outlive all of us who are involved in it today. Those who care about it today can increase the chances that it will be around in the future by supporting that future—not only through the kinds of donations that have allowed us to continue to operate in recent years, but through inclusion in individuals' wills. If COMMUNITIES matters to you, please consider including a bequest to it in your end-of-life financial planning. For details about how to do that (and/or to donate now), please contact us directly at editor@gen-us.net. Thank you!

And thanks for joining us for a new year of COMMUNITIES. 🐦

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Members and volunteers gather in the summer of 2024 at Living Energy Farm (Louisa, Virginia), where thermal collectors mounted on the roof of the strawbale-insulated main house feed into an active solar heating

system integrated with a direct drive DC Microgrid (see pages 12-17). Photo courtesy of Living Energy Farm.

COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

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LETTERS



Community Led Success

Diana Leafe Christian's very positive review of our book, *Community Led Housing: a Cohousing Development Approach*, in COMMUNITIES #205 is an author's delight. However, to respect the reviewer's emphasis on detail and accuracy, we offer one correction.

The reviewer observes in her footnote 1 that we say: "among cohousing startups in Canada, 80 percent fail and 20 percent succeed, and of those helped by CDC half succeed" (p. 51). In fact, CDC has enjoyed a 100 percent success rate supporting cohousing groups to completion who have engaged our services.

Thank you,

Margaret Critchlow and Ronaye Matthew
Harbourside Cohousing / Cranberry Commons Cohousing
Sooke / Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada

Ideological Polarization

Jahia LaSangoma [in "Critical Race Theory: Another Viewpoint," COMMUNITIES #205, commenting on "Wounded Healers," COMMUNITIES #204] seems to think it's impossible for me to be both committed to ending racism, and skeptical of the effectiveness of Critical Social Justice strategies, at the same time. Marianne Merola [in "Insights and Head-Scratches," COMMUNITIES #205] questions whether I might be a social conservative whose views better fit with Fox News, as if someone on the radical left cannot observe a problem with a popular political/social theory and want us to critique it within our own activist circles.

What both writers don't know is that I have participated in and taught anti-oppression workshops for more than 20 years. The kind of polarization expressed by their responses is one reason I chose to write anonymously on this issue. There is widespread belief that you cannot question the ideology unless you are against equality.

What if you are *for* equality, and you think the current ideology is not getting us there? What if you are so committed to ending racism that you have begun to doubt the effectiveness of the strategy at hand, because you've seen it fail time and time again? Where do you go, as a political radical, who does not like the conservative agenda that would ban abortion, end trans medicine, and defund public health care, yet who sees only conservatives publicly making the point that postmodern-inspired Critical Social Justice is leading to more fragmentation and social damage, not to healing, unity, or equality?

I am not alone in asking these questions, and I am not the first politically left person to publicly speak about the damaging impacts of CSJ-based strategies.*

After our experience with Bev, my community has not thrown CSJ out the window—that would be like refusing to accept a new resident just because they are Catholic. All our community residents are committed to protecting human rights, but we come from several different ideological angles. What we do is screen people for their tendency towards polarization: You can believe what you believe, but if someone you live with believes differently, do you demonize them? How "inhuman" do you think someone is when they have different political beliefs than you? How easy is it for you to stop listening before you hear someone else's real point? Do you need everyone in your social orbit to also be in your echo chamber?

When I say, "I want to be seen as a good, albeit flawed, person," I am actually suggesting a way out of this mess. I am suggesting an alternate strategy that leaves grievance studies behind and leads us towards a more equal world. I'm not saying, "White people are good" (although we are); I am saying, "All people are good—and flawed."

We cannot put Black people on a pedestal and believe that everything they say about racism is more enlightened than what we can observe and learn ourselves. Putting someone on a pedestal is as dehumanizing as throwing them under the bus. Black people are human, and it's only natural that they might grab onto an ideology that says they are always right in every aggrieved feeling they have where white people are involved. That doesn't make it true.

We have to have our own minds on this issue. We have to notice when our strategies are failing to lead us towards our goals. We have to be willing to call in all possible evidence and correct our course. Otherwise we will not get where we want to go: to a world in which all humans are human first, equal in dignity, and enriched by close relationships with whomever they choose, regardless of identity or skin color.

***All of the following critiques of CSJ ideologies originate from the political left:**

John McWhorter, *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America*

Coleman Hughes, *The End of Race Politics: Arguments for a Colorblind America*

Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything About Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody*

Dr. Val Thomas, *Cynical Therapies: Perspectives on the Antitherapeutic Nature of Critical Social Justice*

Kathleen Stock, *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism*

Shannon Kelly

Author, "Wounded Healers"

Check Your Privilege

Critical Social Justice (CSJ) theory, as defined by Progressispossible.org, is a derivative worldview that sees individuals primarily through the lens of their social group memberships. This perspective emphasizes the unequal power and privilege that different groups hold in society. CSJ focuses on how dominant groups perpetuate oppression and marginalization, and advocates for greater awareness of racial and social injustices. This awareness—sometimes referred to as “wokeness”—is not limited to acknowledging isolated incidents but aims to expose systemic and institutional racism.

With the election of a new administration (number 47 now in office), social justice must shift toward community-building and supporting our human family like never before. This moment calls for those who do not experience racism or microaggressions on a regular basis to ask difficult, uncomfortable questions if they truly want to be effective allies. *How has your existence been politicized? In what ways do you experience injustice when no one is there to observe it? How would you like to be supported by someone (people) with privilege?*

It is crucial to keep one's privileges in check and not to delegitimize entire social theories simply because they have the potential to create barriers in one's personal relationships or worldview. Perhaps, there are fundamental differences and disconnects within one's personal relationships and perceptions of the world to begin with that social theories, such as Critical Social Justice Theory, serve as a detective to unveil. Understanding the lived experiences of those CSJ seeks to address through its strategies is vital in discussions, and thus, it must be a mission of all people to become awake, alert, and educated in how social injustices play active roles in their direct environments. People often disregard the existence of such realities due to their own perceived role of not being a perpetrator; however, it is important, now more than ever, to remember that silence is violence and ignorance is not bliss.

I empathize with the heartbreak of losing a friend, but I find it troubling that CSJ is not seen as an essential and necessary tool for addressing injustice, in Shannon Kelly's perspective, especially after experiencing how unchecked privileges became a problematic obstacle within her friendship with Bev—a friendship where two people were seeking to create change in two different directions. CSJ became a catalyst for what created the barrier in their friendship, and thus personal anger and frustration became a generalized form of it. When living in a community, it often happens that one's own conditionings and life

experiences prior to that point come up to the surface level. If one does not do the personal work to be mindful and intentional in their interactions, acknowledge what deep, and sometimes painful parts of their past are still living in their bodies, then it will be difficult to avoid projection and the repetition of an unhealthy pattern when confronted with social challenges and feedback. We need to be honest with ourselves, check our privileges, and admit where we are incorrect and can be better.

We are not in a place of societal progress to say “All people are good—and flawed,” and thus leave grievance studies behind. If anything, we are going backward, seeing that white supremacy has been deemed an accurate depiction of what our country stands for with our current political leaders. People of privilege will directly benefit from the conservative administration in charge, and thus must educate themselves in the injustices that People of Color face everyday and are born into a life of needing to navigate through. People of privilege must identify their privileges to make a difference where injustice exists and amplify the voices that speak to those injustices.

It is not that Black people seek to be put on a pedestal and that their opinions on racism are more “enlightened” than the observations and findings made by non-Black people, as per Shannon's qualms in her letter, “Ideological Polarization.” In a colonized and indoctrinated society such as the United States, Black people are *born* silenced. So, when they speak on their experiences, it is the truth that is being spoken. They want equal rights for all because there are *not* currently equal rights for all. When a theory like CSJ is developed in response to marginalization, the goals of those who live with discrimination on a daily basis will naturally differ from the goals of individuals who do not belong to marginalized groups. This is a key distinction that supports Critical Social Justice Theory (CSJ), which does not merely ask, “Is racist behavior present in this interaction?” Instead, CSJ asserts that “Racism is occurring in this (and every) situation,” and calls for the uncovering and visibility of racism in all its forms, holding racists accountable.

Personally, I entered into a state of dismay when I read Shannon's dismissive

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 contribute articles that profile community living and why people choose it, descriptions of what's difficult and what works well, news about existing and forming communities, or articles that illuminate community experiences—past and present—offering insights into mainstream cultural issues. We also seek articles about cooperative ventures of all sorts—in workplaces, in neighborhoods, among people sharing common interests—and about “creating community where you are.”

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

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

Submissions Policy

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

Advertising Policy

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

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

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

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

What is an “Intentional Community”?

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

remark, “Black people are human, and it's only natural that they might grab onto an ideology that says they are always right in every aggrieved feeling they have where white people are involved.” It seems to me that through this statement, Shannon has clung onto her personal view on the “rightness” that a group of people have on an ideology, rather than why a grievance is occurring in the first place. It was a stark reminder of how dismissiveness can derail important conversations about race and systemic injustice. Racism is not theoretical. It is not a debate topic. The existence of structural racism should not be framed as a “political viewpoint” as it has been in recent years—it is real, it is tangible, and it affects the lives of innocent people every day.

Racism, and the theories designed to confront it, are not abstract concepts. CSJ offers tools to see, understand, and act against the systemic and institutional injustices that about 44 percent of the nation's population face (Census.gov). Ignoring or denying their validity only serves to perpetuate the very systems of oppression they seek to challenge. So with that, the need to check your privileges is essential in fighting the fight for equality. Checking one's privileges can look like listening to the voice speaking on an issue that affects that person more than it does you. While fighting injustice through mutual aid and direct community building must come from an organized system, humbling oneself in order to be a purpose-driven ally is the first step.

Elika Sepulveda
Los Angeles, California

Works Cited:

“Critical Social Justice—*Progress Is Possible*.” *Progress Is Possible*, 29 Aug. 2021, progressispossible.org/worldviews/critical-social-justice. Accessed 22 Jan. 2025.

“QuickFacts: United States.” *Census Bureau QuickFacts*, United States Census Bureau, 2024, census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045224.

The advertisement features a green and red header with the text "Heartwood Cohousing" and "Where Community and Nature Come Together in Gorgeous SW Colorado". Below the header is a photograph of a lush, green landscape with trees and a small building. At the bottom, there is a blue box with white text providing details about the community, including its history, location, and contact information. A QR code is also present in the bottom right corner.

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.
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Center for Communal Studies
Research Prizes and Grant

We invite submissions for the best undergraduate (\$250), graduate (\$500) student papers and Travel Grant (\$2000) on historic or contemporary communal groups, intentional communities and utopias.

Submission Deadline: April 10
 Email submissions to Dr. Silvia Rode at sarode@usi.edu

SCAN ME

One Life, Live It!
 Salthamer Ecovillage and the Importance of Neuro-Inclusive Communities

Charles Durrett, AIA

"An example about how community can help heal our world."
 -Laurie Frank -CohoUS Board President

"Bullseye." -Dr. Bill Thomas

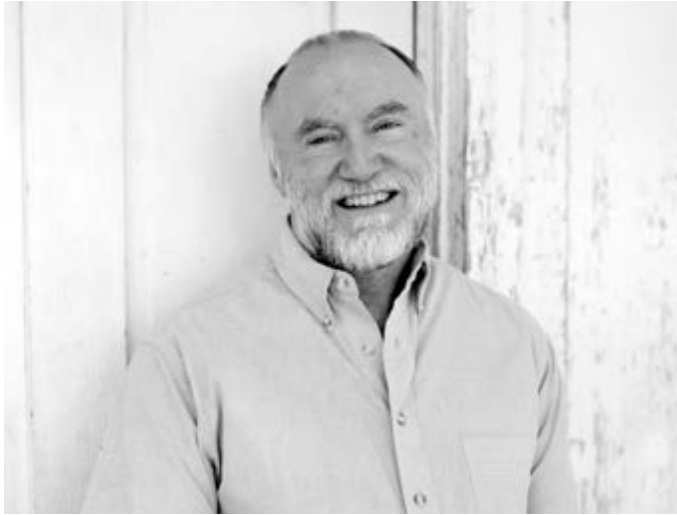
To buy the book and find out more, visit:

www.TinyURL.com/OneLifeLiveItBook

The Cohousing Company

340 29th Ave, #307, Oakland, CA 94601: 1 Bed/1Bath/896 Sq Feet. Ideal opportunity to downsize and maintain your independence in a vibrant 55+ co-housing community. The home features a balcony off the living room featuring stunning sunsets and plentiful windows throughout. The open kitchen features a breakfast bar and upgraded storage, and the adjoining dining area is lit by generous-sized windows. Create a 2nd bedroom in the bonus room by closing off the wall and adding a door. Enjoy lounging and container gardening on the private extra-large patio area at your front door. An in-unit laundry includes a washer/dryer unit. Numerous common spaces include a shared kitchen and dining room for community meals, library, media room, yoga/fitness room, hobby/tool room, meeting spaces, and on-site 2-bedroom guest suite which can be reserved for visitors. The community also offers shared outdoor spaces including open-air courtyard patios, community garden, and a large private dock on the estuary. Additional convenient features include bike, paddleboard, and kayak storage. Phoenix Commons is located in the creative and eclectic Jingtletown neighborhood, just across the Park Street bridge from Alameda shops, restaurants, parks and beaches. Easy access to the freeway, public transit, and Oakland Airport.

Contact Johanna K. Hall, Realtor® DRE#01937719
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Honoring Laird Schaub, 1949-2024

With contributions from Harvey Baker (FIC), Neil Planchon (Cohousing Research Network/CohoUS), and others

We are sad to announce that Laird Schaub, an instrumental figure in the intentional communities movement and major force in the rebirth and thriving of the FIC, died December 17th at age 75 after nearly nine years of living with multiple myeloma.

Laird dedicated his life to fostering connection, collaboration, and skillful handling of emotional energy in meetings, helping countless groups navigate the joys and challenges of building strong, inclusive communities. His teachings on group process and community living inspired so many, leaving a legacy that continues to ripple through our movement. It's almost impossible to put into words the positive impact that Laird has had in the cooperative world, whether it was by supporting individuals, communities, or organizations.

Laird was one of the original incorporators of the Fellowship for Intentional Community in 1987, and served as its Executive Secretary and primary administrator from 1987 until he handed the reins to Sky Blue in 2015. Since then he continued his service to the FIC (now named the Foundation for Intentional Community) by serving on the Awards Committee and providing numerous sessions for the FIC's online education and events programs (you can find his re-run courses

by scrolling down at ic.org/fic-courses). He was also co-founder of Sandhill Farm in Rutledge, Missouri (living there for 39 years) and an enthusiastic writer, serving as publisher and frequent contributor to COMMUNITIES and authoring a blog, "Laird's Commentary on Community and Consensus," at communityandconsensus.blogspot.com.

Laird's passion for cooperation and community led him to a joyous life making a positive change in the world, promoting the deep values he held—including compassion, understanding, and belief in the power of people working together. His time, energy, and creativity have made an impact on the present and future world of cooperative culture that is inestimable. We are grateful for his presence in our lives and are saddened by his loss.

For those who wish to learn more about Laird's journey or share their condolences with his loved ones, we encourage you to visit his CaringBridge site: www.caringbridge.org/site/1295c428-817c-3b8b-af02-d9b1094a1be4. The Summer 2025 issue of COMMUNITIES will include a more extensive tribute to Laird; to submit your memories for possible last-minute inclusion, please email editor@gen-us.net as soon as possible. See also "Remembering Laird," the editor's personal reflection in this issue. 🐦

The Community, Consensus, and Facilitation Book Project

Several of Laird's students and friends have come together to ensure his wisdom and work continue to help communities by turning his lifetime of teaching into a series of books—a project being funded through a GoFundMe campaign: gofund.me/6e57fd23.

Over his past four decades as a consensus and facilitation trainer, mediator, and consultant to intentional communities and other cooperative groups, Laird wrote more than 130 articles in COMMUNITIES, over 1200 blog entries, and a wealth of handouts and monographs about various aspects of cooperative group dynamics. However, he never had time to com-

pile this material into book form. Early in 2024, with Laird's blessing, a small team formed to start organizing and editing these writings.

Given adequate funding, the team plans to cover the following subjects as separate publications: Secular Consensus, Inclusive Facilitation, Navigating Conflict in Cooperative Groups, and Dynamics in Intentional Communities (key challenges and how to address them). Your contribution at gofund.me/6e57fd23 can support these efforts. Thank you for considering this way of honoring Laird's memory and helping his work continue! 🐦

Remembering Laird

By Chris Roth

I first met Laird in fall 1986 when a small group of us from End of the Road (the residential community at the place better known as Aprovecho) spent part of a day at nearby Appletree Community, where he and his friend Geoph Kozeny were also visiting (for, I believe, FEC networking meetings held in western Oregon that year).¹

I was struck immediately by the warmth both Laird and Geoph radiated and their interest in people—including, in this case, me, the latest arrival to an impromptu game of badminton. They shared an obvious love of life and of community, accompanied by keen intelligence, wit (coming, however, at no one else's expense), dedication to cooperative ideals, and a sense of fun. All of this I would remember a couple years later when I decided to make a move that would put me in their vicinity again for much more than an afternoon.

Laird had already touched my life from a distance years earlier. I had learned about the Federation of Egalitarian Communities in the pages of my high school library's copies of *COMMUNITIES*, and had sent for more information. In retrospect, I realize that the extensive brochure that arrived, "Living the Dream," had Laird's fingerprints all over it, especially in the portrait of the FEC member community that most inspired me, Sandhill Farm. There, attunement to the earth and living with the land were defining qualities, values held just as strongly as nonviolence, cooperation, and egalitarianism. At that point I fell in love with the dream of living at a place like Sandhill.

When, almost two years after that badminton game at Appletree, End of the Road had started to seem more like "Dead End" to me, I remembered the welcoming energy I'd found in those interactions, as well as my earlier fantasies about transplanting myself into the pages of that FEC brochure. I searched out updated information about Sandhill and other intentional communities, then announced my departure from End of the Road and started a cross-country journey whose first stop was Sandhill Farm, where my visit coincided with sorghum harvest season. Again I felt that sense of affirmation and excitement about life, as well as a deep attunement to place, that I'd gotten tastes of previously. And Laird, who'd cofounded Sandhill, made a point of getting to know me from the very outset by initiating a conversation filled with questions and curiosity—something that I witnessed him doing with each new arrival to this small community. No one spending time at Sandhill in those days felt anonymous—at least not for long—thanks especially to Laird's welcome, and also to that of his fellow communitarians, including his precocious son Ceilee (see remembrances in issue #205), co-parent Ann, and co-parent Stan (see remembrances in issue #193). Others who'd joined more recently also shared in this culture of inclusion and connection, which Laird had been a central part of creating.

After my several-week stint at Sandhill that year I continued on my planned trip East to visit family for Thanksgiving and check out other groups. But after visiting a dozen other communities and even living in one for six months I found myself pulled back to Sandhill, where I'd felt more at home than anywhere else, and returned by the start of the following sorghum season. For the next year-and-a-quarter I was privileged to be part of a remarkably close, well-functioning, land-based community, actually "living the dream" through the sea-

Laird's tag-team all-nighters in the sugar shack, boiling down sorghum molasses or maple syrup, were examples to me of "work as love made manifest"—and similar examples seemed to abound wherever Laird was involved.





sons instead of simply reading the brochure.

I couldn't have had this experience by relying on pre-existing personal contacts—I came from a very different background. But fortunately for me and others, the community that Laird and friends had created invited participation from “back-to-the-land newbies” and anyone inspired by their egalitarian vision. A desire to learn, a love of being outdoors, and a solid communitarian work ethic easily made up for lack of previous homesteading experience or pre-existing personal connections. There were also plenty of ways to contribute depending on differing physical abilities and tolerances; child care, preparing meals, and corresponding with potential visitors were valued as highly as hard physical labor or the ability to brave weather extremes to do it. A variety of activities filled everyone's week—and the community culture placed equal importance on personal and group regeneration and nurturance—including meeting our own needs directly from the land without money as an intermediary (we produced 90+ percent of our own food, heated with our own firewood, built mostly with our own lumber, etc.)—as on more conventional income production. The value-added crops that supported us economically required only a minority of our time; the rest could be devoted to creating our lives together, including not only physical self-sustenance but culture-building and welcoming others.

Land-care, community-care, and self-care existed in a balance and seemed mutually reinforcing rather than in contradiction. Ultimately a strong shared connection to the land helped define our bonds within the group and our own personal rhythms. Laird spent 39 years in this community that he cofounded, and over that span many hundreds of people spent significant chunks of time there too. Whether they were visiting for sorghum season, or living there for years or decades, that time helped shape who they were and are. Just as Laird's eventual consulting, facilitation, mediation, and training work with many dozens of distinct groups and with many hundreds of students often had profound, life-changing effects—and is perhaps more likely to be talked about in dispersed communitarian networks—the day-to-day experiences that countless people had at Sandhill, due in part to Laird's integral role there, are irreplaceable parts of numerous individuals' personal journeys through life.

Both during my first times at Sandhill (late '80s-early '90s) and my later stay there (spring through fall 2010, an attempt to reprise my earlier experience), I witnessed firsthand the qualities for which Laird is legendary. He was an apparently tireless worker, incredibly productive and efficient, finding joy in the effort; a “slow” or “low-productivity” day for him could still run circles around many other people's most productive days. Yet he was also someone who knew how to relax and bring people together to simply “be”; he was skilled in coalescing group energy whether in work or in celebration or camaraderie. His epic cook shifts were just as “all-in” as his epic food-preservation shifts or his epic sorghum-harvesting shifts or his epic sugar-house shifts, and had the same kind of abundant results. He was not ambivalent about life, and not someone to half-do anything.

He inspired that same dedication and immersion-in-life in others, while tending to attract those who also found joy in commitment to whatever they were doing. Stan's and

Laird's tag-team all-nighters in the sugar shack, boiling down sorghum molasses or maple syrup during the short, intense windows of harvest and processing for each of those crops, were examples to me of “work as love made manifest”—and similar examples seemed to abound wherever Laird was involved.

During my first stints at Sandhill, these character qualities seemed to be almost purely assets in community. Laird was one of three functional parents to Ceilee (not yet 10 years old then), and had close connections to every member of the community. Twenty years later, when I returned, all other human members of that earlier iteration of Sandhill Farm, with the exception of Stan, had moved on, replaced by newer members. The nature of the community had started to change in multiple ways; interpersonal and generational conflicts were more evident; and Laird, who was now married to a non-resident of Sandhill, had also shifted much of his focus and nearly limitless energy to his consulting, facilitation, mediation, and training work with often far-flung groups (usually reached via Amtrak). I now sensed a sometimes painful distance, created by circumstance and by shifting community dynamics, even when Laird was physically present—which he was, operating at double-time as usual, for approximately half the days of each year. Despite the more fragmented feel of the community at that time, his contributions continued to be abundant, with food-preservation shifts becoming even more intense and productive because they were squeezed into narrower travel-dictated time windows, and his meal-preparation shifts equally impressive. Meanwhile, his contri-

butions in the larger communities world were blossoming in ways that many on site had only inklings of.

Within a couple years of my own next return to Oregon, he would leave Sandhill, and more changes were to follow. In the end, thankfully, he did spend his final days surrounded by the kind of love, support, and extended community that he had offered others throughout his life—and these came to him in ways that would not have happened if he had resisted the changes that took him away from his long-term community home, difficult though that separation was.

I had the privilege of working closely with Laird on several projects. One was the first book-length *Directory of Intentional Communities* (1990/91) published by FIC, put together by a team that included Geoph Kozeny (camped out at Sandhill for many months in a trailer), Laird, Becca Krantz (now part of the fundraising team for Laird's book project), and me. A few years later, Laird would lead the rescue of COMMUNITIES by bringing it under FIC's wing to resume publication after a couple years' lapse, with Diana Leafe Christian (currently assembling a broader set of tributes to Laird for issue #207) as new editor and Laird being a consistent champion of the magazine as publisher.

When I became editor in 2008, Laird and I began corresponding frequently, not only about his quarterly columns but about all things magazine-related. When I moved

to Sandhill again for the growing season of 2010, he, Yana Ludwig, and I revived a project that had been dormant: revisions of the "reprint packets" of past COMMUNITIES articles. This developed into the 15-volume *Best of COMMUNITIES* series, still available through the FIC bookstore. He continued to be an invaluable source of advice and support for the magazine until the end of his tenure as FIC Executive Secretary, and even after that he could be relied on to craft (at my request) writing to respond to particular needs, and to shape blog entries into publishable articles. His "wordplay volume" varied, from as low as 1 or 2 to as high as "11" ("Minding the 'P's for Cues," COMMUNITIES #143, is one memorable example of the latter), but it was never entirely absent, reflecting a palpable joy in language that helps explain his written productivity. All told, Laird wrote more than 130 articles for the magazine—more than anyone else ever has. More important, Laird's belief in the value of the magazine quite literally saved it from oblivion more than three decades ago; his ongoing involvement and energetic support helped keep it going for decades more; and as with everything he did in life, he was generous in what he offered and shared in its pages.

Laird also shared himself generously with my home community in Oregon, as he did with many others, offering consultation and facilitation help at times when we especially needed it. Despite the strong value Laird placed on effectiveness and on reaching well-chosen goals, the personal qualities that shone through in his in-person talks and workshops, and also in simply spending time with him, weren't primarily or solely about "work" or "accomplishing things" in a conventional sense, but about valuing each person and finding our points of connection (thus, happily, also making "work" and "accomplishing things" a lot easier). Laird believed that we do have the capacity to be "living the dream" (whether that includes going back-to-the-land as a primary focus, or simply going back-to-cooperative-connection no matter what the physical setting). His work and his example were constant inspirations not only to me but to countless others...and will continue to be.

More remembrances will be coming in issue #207, from a wide variety of voices. I could write much more myself, but I will end this here for now. Laird's long survival under a terminal diagnosis gave many years to prepare for this moment, and yet it is still difficult to say goodbye. It is also easy, however, to feel gratitude for all the time that Laird was able to be with us, often defying the odds and making the most of life in typical Laird style.

Thank you, Laird. 🌱

Chris Roth edits COMMUNITIES. As mentioned, the Summer 2025 issue will include a more extensive tribute to Laird; to submit your memories for possible last-minute inclusion, please email editor@gen-us.net as soon as possible.

1. Some background for those less familiar: The Federation of Egalitarian Communities (FEC) is a network of income-sharing communities based on equality, nonviolence, ecological principles, and collective stewardship rather than individual ownership; Laird played a central role for many years. Both Laird's home community, Sandhill Farm (Rutledge, Missouri), and Appletree Community (Saginaw, Oregon) were among the members at that time; End of the Road/Aprovecho (Cottage Grove, Oregon) was not. Geoph Kozeny, the Peripatetic Communitarian, traveled the intentional communities world presenting an ever-expanding slideshow and eventually creating the *Visions of Utopia* videos, a project which Laird brought to completion. More stories about these involvements and many others are likely to appear in COMMUNITIES #207.



The Direct Drive DC Microgrid: An Energy Future the Whole World Can Afford

By Debbie Piesen



Living Energy Farm members and volunteers, in the summer of 2024.



Cooking green beans with biogas! We use burners made especially for biogas, as they work better than modified conventional gas stoves in our experience. Home Biogas is a good source for burners.



A winnowing fan modified to run direct drive.

In 2010, a group of eight people came together to start Living Energy Farm (LEF) in Louisa, Virginia. Our mission was to demonstrate that a fulfilling life is possible without the use of any fossil fuel. We wanted our demonstration village to be accessible to all persons regardless of income. Each member of our group was a current or former member of Twin Oaks Community or Acorn Community (both are income-sharing communes also in Louisa). We all knew by then that community living is more sustainable than the mainstream. For anyone living in a single family home, it's an uphill battle to compost, afford solar equipment, avoid driving, or grow your own food. Simply by sharing—whether it's energy systems, housing, meals, tools, childcare, etc.—community makes it easier to live sustainably.

And yet, even in intentional communities, it is not easy or cheap to transition to 100 percent renewables. Communities that try to go off-grid often end up connecting back to the grid over time. Either their system doesn't work well, or they realize they're spending more replacing batteries than they would be spending on utilities. At LEF we wanted to avoid the high cost and ecological footprint of large battery sets. We assumed this would mean mostly doing without modern conveniences. So we called ourselves “neo-Amish” (Amish without the patriarchy). We stockpiled beeswax for candles, bought hand tools to replace our power tools, and researched rocket stoves for cooking.

Communities often turn out pretty different from the founders' original vision. That was certainly true for us, and mostly for the better. Through years of tinkering and technology development work, we are now living off the grid in more comfort than we ever thought possible. We can take a hot shower whenever we want, surf the internet, heat our home, run a machine shop, dry our crops, cook our meals, and more—with no grid power, no generator, and very little firewood—all with our community's direct drive DC Microgrid.

We do make some adjustments. We bake bread and do laundry when the sun shines, and use efficient laptops instead of desktop computers. I'll take a navy shower if it's been cloudy for several days. But it's

really not so hard. What makes our microgrid work is good design, prioritizing conservation, and—mostly importantly—living in community.

What the World Can Afford

Most climate change mitigation strategies call for mass electrification of energy demands, to be powered by solar and wind, and backed up with battery storage. Activists and observers are starting to become alarmed by the economic, environmental, and human rights implications of a build-out of PV, wind, and battery storage on scale to meet the American appetite for energy. There's good reason for this alarm. To meet residential energy demands with renewables in our bioregion—Mid-Atlan-

tic US, which has four hours of sun per day on average¹, and little useful wind—requires approximately 12kWh of battery storage² and 3kW of photovoltaic (PV) panels³ per person. We're nowhere close to installing this much PV and battery capacity, and already lithium mines and other extraction projects required for “green growth” are creating environmental devastation and human rights violations around the globe.⁴

By comparison, direct drive DC Microgrid at Living Energy Farm consists of 250 watts (.25kW) of PV panels and 200 watt hours (.2kWh) of battery storage per person. Our microgrid design requires eight percent as many PV panels and **two percent as much battery capacity** as is needed to provide residential energy services with conventional solar and storage systems that supply AC (alternating current).⁵

So how, at Living Energy Farm, do we manage to power an almost-middle-class, and certainly modern lifestyle, with such a small resource footprint? At LEF we use batteries only for very small loads (lights, fans, and electronics).⁶ The majority of the energy in our microgrid is stored in forms other than electricity, and is delivered by one of three systems: **solar thermal**, **direct drive**, or **biogas**. I'll explain these systems one at a time.

Solar Thermal

In our climate, the three biggest residential energy end-uses are heating,⁷ cooling, and



Our entire metalworking shop is powered by direct drive, including the milling machine that Nika is running in this photo. Alexis teaches a shop class to the kids from LEF and neighboring communities once per week.



A solar direct refrigerator, installed by Living Energy Lights' team at Solidarity Yaad farm in Jamaica. The fridge is a great example of non-electric (thermal mass) energy storage.



Each day Otto feeds the biogas digester about a half bucket of biomass—grass clippings, kitchen scraps, seed-processing chaff, etc.—causing effluent overflow into a storage tank. Effluent is then pumped onto our orchards and gardens, completing the nutrient cycle.



This is the shed that houses our biodigester. The digester itself is a plastic tank surrounded by strawbales and cellulose insulation. The thermal collectors on the roof supply heat to the digester. The blue bag on the right is our biogas storage.

Photos courtesy of Living Energy Farm

We build insulated solar electric cookers (ISECs) in our shop at LEF. In the photo above, Debbie (the author) teaches about ISEC construction as part of our annual DC solar training program.



This buzz saw, made to run off of a tractor PTO at 20HP or more, cuts firewood via direct drive with just 1.4kW of power (about 2HP) using a permanent magnet DC motor.



Another example of non-electric storage: a pressure tank supplies water pressure at night, when our pump doesn't run.



water heating. For summer cooling at Living Energy Farm, we use fans, shade trees, and cross-ventilation. For space and water heating, we use solar thermal systems that capture and store solar energy as heat, not electricity. These systems are durable and reliable, but also take significant resources and skilled labor to design and install. Cooperative housing is what makes them both effective and affordable. In multifamily homes there is less perimeter per unit of thermal mass, which allows for more effective heat storage and less heat loss. Also, economies of scale and shared systems make a dramatic difference in the cost per capita of solar thermal.

That's why step one is cooperative use. Step two is insulation. Solar energy, for all its virtues, is pretty wimpy compared to other sources of heat—especially in winter, when we need it the most. So there's really no way to stay warm with solar without very high insulation standards. Our preferred method is to build a conventional stick frame, and stack strawbales inside the frame. But more important than the type of insulation is the quantity. You'll need thick walls, good quality windows and doors, and adequate ceiling insulation.

Step three is to build an active solar heating system, in which thermal collectors capture solar heat to be moved into storage. (In this context, the word "active" differentiates these systems from "passive" solar heating, which does not pump air or fluid into storage.) Solar thermal collectors can heat fluid—typically water or antifreeze—or air. They are at least three times more efficient than solar electric panels at turning solar energy into heat.⁸

Direct drive pumps and blowers move solar-heated fluid or air into storage. Heat is stored not in a battery but in thermal mass, which may be water in a tank, gravel and dirt under the floor, or the floor itself. Thermal mass is cheap, durable, and much better than batteries at storing heat.

Solar thermal is nothing new; it's been around for decades. We helped many of our friends install systems back in the '90s. But interest in thermal systems has declined since the '00s, even as grid-tie PV becomes more popular. Most solar installers no longer install solar thermal, citing the faster payback of PV systems.⁹ While it's true that incen-

tives have brought down the cost of PV, it's also true that building a solar thermal system takes more skill than building a PV system. (Wires bend more easily than pipes.) Most solar installers simply don't know how to design or build solar thermal systems, so they don't recommend them to their customers.

These trends are unfortunate, because we need solar thermal systems more than ever. A solar thermal system is the only heat source that is both environmentally benign and resilient. Rural communities often burn firewood for heat, but this reduces air quality and has a high carbon footprint.¹⁰ Heat pumps are touted as the environmental alternative, but they create a dangerous reliance on the grid for heat as winter storms become worse, and outages more common. It's pure fantasy to imagine that we're going to keep all these heat pumps running with PV and industrial battery storage through a cloudy winter. In the real world, if you want a sustainable, resilient way to heat your home, what works is insulation and solar thermal. With these tools, we stay warm with no fossil fuels, no batteries, and very little firewood.

Direct Drive

Direct drive (also known as daylight drive, or solar direct) means connecting DC (direct current) loads directly to one or more PV panels, with no battery storage or inverters. We did not invent direct drive at LEF—solar direct water pumping, for example, is used for irrigation around the world. But we are the only organization we know of that teaches people to build integrated direct drive circuits. This means that we power many DC loads directly from a single PV supply.

Direct drive does a LOT of work at LEF. The list of jobs includes: water pumping, cooking, refrigeration, food processing, metalworking (our shop includes a lathe, milling machine, band saw, grinders, air compressor, and more), seed processing, food dehydration, washing clothes, cutting firewood, heating our buildings (by blowing solar heated air under the floor), charging ebike batteries, and mowing the lawn. All this work is done by seven humble PV panels. And the list continues to grow. What makes direct drive so efficient, and cheap, is the fact that DC systems can be overloaded without any damage to the motors or the circuitry itself. This is NOT true for AC systems, which must be built with a reserve capacity to ensure motors receive full power. AC motors can only

tolerate 10 percent voltage variation. DC motors, on the other hand, can handle 0-150 percent of their rated voltage without damage.

The voltage tolerance of DC vs. AC motors sounds like a minor technical detail. But the environmental and financial implications are huge. If you were to ask a typical solar installer to build a solar system to support our machine shop, for example, you would be looking at tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of dollars in panels and batteries. Instead, we run our shop with \$1,000 worth of PV panels—panels which, incidentally, power a whole lot more than just the shop.

Sourcing equipment is an ongoing challenge.¹¹ Most AC appliances will not run on direct drive. At LEF, only two of our direct drive appliances were purchased as such: our pump and refrigerator. The rest we built or modified ourselves. One of the most important discoveries we made is powering belt driven equipment with permanent magnet DC motors running direct drive. These motors are commonly used in industry, therefore widely available, and very durable. They are the backbone of our farm, running all kinds of tools and equipment. We have also converted many appliances that have universal (AC or DC) motors, or nichrome heating elements, to run direct.

Non-electric energy storage is very important in a direct drive system. Our refrigerator, for example, runs only when the sun shines. It has extra-thick walls and a chest design, which ensure that the food stays cold overnight. For cooking with direct drive, we built our own Insulated Solar Electric Cookers (ISECs), designed in cooperation with a project out of Cal Poly University.¹² These cookers build heat gradually, allowing them to cook with very modest solar input. Another example of non-electric storage is pressure tanks. Our direct drive pump pushes water into tanks during the day. The water compresses air bladders inside the tanks, which maintain water pressure at night.

In our direct drive system, “load management” is fully manual. We install voltmeters, and watch how the voltage changes as we turn loads on and off. If it drops too low when a load is turned on, there’s not enough sun to do what you’re trying to do. You can wait for more sun, or turn off some other loads and try again. The system teaches you to use power when you have it, and conserve when needed.

We host volunteers at our farm, and new people often need time to adjust to direct drive, but almost everyone gets it in a week or two. It’s a different relationship with energy, like growing your food instead of getting it from the store. It’s a lot less work than



Kathryn installs foam insulation along the inside of the LEF common house foundation in 2012. Sub-grade insulation is important in radiant floors built for thermal storage, to retain the heat pushed into the floor during the day.



Alexis installs the last pane of glass on the LEF common house roof. Almost the entire south-facing roof is a homemade hot air collector, like a long, flat greenhouse.



Strawbale construction is a great way to make use of low-skill community labor. This crew stacked 400 strawbales around Magnolia House in one day, in 2021.

Ricardo, Millo, and Marielisa all graduated from LEF's DC solar training program and are now installing systems throughout the Caribbean. This installation is in the mountains of Jamaica.



Marielisa wires a junction box for a 12VDC circuit at Magnolia Collective, as part of our 2023 training program.



Twelve electricians, activists, and farmers from Puerto Rico and Jamaica attend a training at LEF, summer 2023.

growing food, though. And it's not a hard fit with the modern lifestyle, particularly in a community context, wherein someone—a retiree, remote worker, or childcare provider, for example—can probably stay home and make sure energy intensive work gets done when the sun shines. If you can grow a garden, you can use direct drive.

Biogas

Natural gas, a fossil fuel that is mostly methane, was produced by ancient microorganisms digesting plants and animals over millions of years. At Living Energy Farm, we have the convenience of natural gas without fracking, pipelines, CNG infrastructure, and other undesirables, by making our own methane at home. It's called biogas.

Biogas is created in a tank known as a digester, or biodigester, which is like a liquid compost pile. Organic matter mixed with water is fed into the tank, and effluent comes out. Biogas accumulates at the top, and it can be burned just like natural gas. Like natural gas, biogas releases carbon dioxide when burned. But it's considered to be carbon neutral because carbon is sequestered in the process of growing the feedstock that goes into the digester. Still, methane itself is a greenhouse gas much more potent than carbon dioxide. While a biogas system is designed to burn gas, not release it, leaks can happen. In the early years of our community, we avoided investing in a biodigester, because of our concerns around methane leaks.

Over time, we came to the conclusion that biogas is an appropriate way to solve our cooking challenges. We decided years ago that we would not use propane. Solar cooking is great, except for when it's too early, too late, or too cloudy. For years, we tried to store solar heat at temperatures high enough for cooking. Solar heat storage isn't hard at lower temperatures—an insulated tank can maintain temperatures hot enough for a shower (110°F) for several days. But cooking temperatures are 300°F or higher. We can store heat at 300°F for a few hours, but not overnight. And what about cloudy days? Firewood was our backup, and let me tell you from experience, starting a fire every morning for breakfast loses its charm pretty quickly. (And yes, it's worse for the climate than gas.¹³)

We started investing seriously in biogas about five years ago. The biggest challenge of biogas production in our climate is keeping the digester warm. Methane production is optimal at 90-105°F, and slows to a crawl below 80°. Community-scale biogas is more common in the tropics, for this reason. Home Biogas, an Israeli company that

sells biodigester kits, instructs you to place their bag in the sun to keep it warm. That may work in Israel, but in Virginia this design will produce a decent amount of gas only a few months out of the year. We ran a Home Biogas system for a few years before deciding to build our own. Our current digester is a 2,000 gallon plastic tank. To keep it warm, we built the tank with an internal heat exchanger connected to flat plate solar thermal collectors, and wrapped the tank with two layers of straw bales and four feet of blown insulation over the top.

Biogas production is another great example of community living making renewable energy cost-effective. We don't recommend a biodigester for a single family. It requires significant up-front investment and ongoing care. You also need feedstock. We've had success feeding our digester grass clippings, kitchen scraps, biowaste from our farm, and human waste (we have a toilet connected directly to the tank). A single family would have a harder time coming up with enough feedstock.

It's also important to use biogas effectively. In the US, biogas is mostly burned for electricity or heat. This is very silly, because these energy needs can be met with solar, which is cheaper and doesn't require

feedstock. The energy needs that our solar microgrid cannot supply are cooking and tractor fuel. For these needs, biogas is wonderful. And as long as we're careful, and cook with sunshine when we have it, we can store enough gas to keep us cooking through weeks of clouds.

Where Do We Go from Here?

At Living Energy Farm we put a lot of time into teaching and supporting others to build DC Microgrids like ours. We host trainings once per year, and give tours once per month to groups ranging in size from eight to 30. Hundreds, more likely thousands, of people have seen our systems first-hand. Many of them tell us that our microgrid is the best off-grid setup they've ever seen. Dozens of people write us every year asking for advice on setting up their own DC Microgrid. And yet, very few of them actually build one. To date, we know of 15 direct drive DC Microgrids currently in use: three in Louisa, Virginia, two in Jamaica, and 10 in Puerto Rico.

As these numbers show, the direct drive movement is growing in the Caribbean. It's easier and cheaper to build DC systems in the tropics, where expensive solar thermal features are not needed. Also, both Puerto Rico and Jamaica have a privatized electrical utility that is corrupt, inept, and widely despised. So people are more motivated to go off-grid. Thanks to the educational efforts of our Caribbean partner organizations, word is

spreading. It's not always an easy sell: well-off Caribbeans generally want conventional solar systems that make AC (alternating current), while many people who would be fine with DC systems are too poor to afford any solar hardware, even relatively cheap direct drive equipment. But we're making some progress.

Here in the US, things are moving more slowly. Like wealthy Caribbeans, Americans want the convenience of being able to use their AC appliances, and if they can afford big battery banks, most people will go that route. (We often tell these people to come to us when they're looking at their first battery replacement.) The convenience factor and the psychology of previous investment in AC appliances are both significant obstacles to adoption of DC systems. But for most environmentally-minded people, convenience or previous investment are not really the biggest barrier. Growing a garden isn't convenient either, and people still do it. The much bigger problem is that American environmentalists can't seem to cooperate enough to build and use shared housing and other community-scale sustainable infrastructure. This rules out cost-effective solar thermal and biogas systems. You just can't do it alone.

Intentional communities are the natural home for our technology; all three DC Microgrids currently in Louisa are, in fact, used by small communities. But the urgency of the climate crisis demands adaptation of the DC Microgrid beyond the intentional communities movement. To this end, we're seeking out partnerships with organizations in our region that work on affordable, cooperative housing and are interested in applying our energy model. We are in the beginning stages of a collaboration with Waterbottle Co-op, a worker-owned construction company in Baltimore that renovates row houses. Another potential project is in the works with Las Palmas, a nonprofit working on affordable housing access in our county. We look forward to seeing where these projects go in the coming years.

We believe that many people would choose to live with a DC Microgrid if the option were available to them. It's comfortable, joyous, and fulfilling. But it's not an option for most people, mainly because our culture values private homes. We can all be living in communities powered by renewable energy, if we choose to build them. Why not start today? 🌱

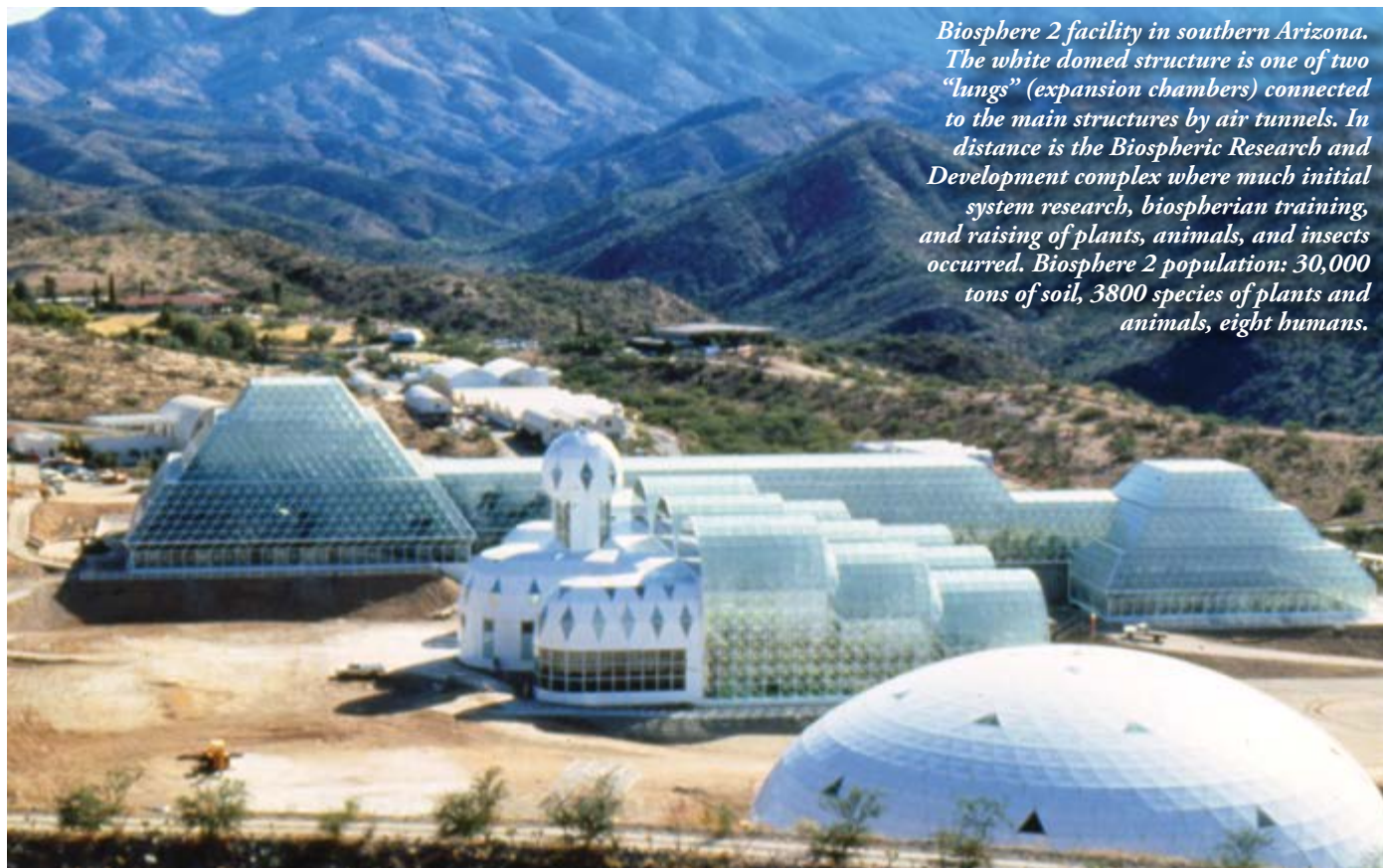
Debbie Piesen (shelher) is one of the founders of Living Energy Farm and has managed the community's seed and food growing since 2011. These days, when she's not farming, Debbie can be found working on DC Microgrid installations, building solar cookers, and managing solar equipment distribution in the Caribbean. In her spare time, she enjoys music, Ultimate frisbee, and hanging out with her two kids, who are both named after persimmon varieties.

1. unboundsolar.com/solar-information/sun-hours-us-map.
2. www.solar.com/learn/how-many-batteries-do-i-need-for-solar. "A large solar system with 30 kWh of battery storage can meet, on average, 96% of critical loads including heating and cooling during a 3-day outage." Average American household size is 2.5 people. 30kWh/2.5 people = 12kWh/person. I ran this number past a few local solar installers I know, and they agreed that it was a reasonable average, if a little low.
3. 12kWh/4 hours per day = 3kW required to charge the batteries. Number should probably be higher to allow more buffer for clouds.
4. www.truthdig.com/articles/the-green-growth-delusion.
5. This number is likely too low, because the buffer for clouds in the Berkeley Lab battery analysis is very minimal.
6. We power these loads at 12VDC to avoid the need for an inverter, and use durable nickel iron batteries. Learn more at livingenergyfarm.org/12v-battery-systems-for-lights-and-electronics.
7. 2020 Residential Energy Consumption Survey, Table CE3.6, "Annual household site end-use expenditures in the United States—totals and averages" www.eia.gov/consumption/residential/data/2020/c&e/pdf/ce3.6.pdf. In the South Atlantic census division, average annual household expenditures for the top three energy end-uses are \$431 for space heating, \$367 for air conditioning, and \$314 for water heating. We do not use air conditioning; instead we design buildings for ventilation, shade, and passive cooling, as well as using fans.
8. www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/article/solar-thermal-is-not-dead. This source claims a

- 12 percent efficiency for PV and 76 percent efficiency for flat plate collectors. This five-fold difference is probably too high, as other sources put PV at 15-20 percent efficient, while estimates range for flat plate and vacuum tube collectors from 50-80 percent, depending on conditions and quality of manufacturing. So we settle on 3X as more realistic number.
9. A typical argument for installing PV instead of solar thermal, although we disagree with their analysis. www.my-pv.com/en/news/photovoltaic-heat-vs-solar-thermal-cost-and-area-comparison. We have had a few friends ask us to take apart and haul away their old thermal systems, such is the lack of excitement around solar thermal these days. It's sad, although we've ended up with some good free equipment as a result.
10. Here's an article that summarizes environmental arguments against heating with firewood: www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/feb/25/pollutionwatch-wood-fires-bad-for-planet-more-evidence-shows. This website has a lot of information about the health impacts of wood smoke: www.dsawsp.org.
11. We started a nonprofit solar equipment company to distribute direct drive equipment: www.livingenergylights.com. On our website we maintain a list of other direct drive equipment suppliers: livingenergylights.com/direct-drive-appliances-available-through-other-suppliers.
12. livingenergyfarm.org/insulated-solar-electric-cooker and digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/mesp/494.
13. www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0301421519304161?via%3Dihub. "Using a stove was found to be the least climate-friendly option to heat a house."

A Conversation with Biospherian Dr. Mark Nelson

By Devin Gleeson and Dr. Mark Nelson



Biosphere 2 facility in southern Arizona. The white domed structure is one of two “lungs” (expansion chambers) connected to the main structures by air tunnels. In distance is the Biospheric Research and Development complex where much initial system research, biospherian training, and raising of plants, animals, and insects occurred. Biosphere 2 population: 30,000 tons of soil, 3800 species of plants and animals, eight humans.

Gill C. Kenny

Dr. Mark Nelson¹ is a Founding Director of the Institute of Ecotechnics². He’s worked for decades in closed ecological research, ecological engineering, ecosystem restoration, wastewater recycling, and more. He currently serves as chairman and CEO of the Institute of Ecotechnics (US) and the head of Wastewater Gardens International³.

Dr. Nelson was one of the members of the crew of eight Biospherians who entered Biosphere 2 in Oracle, Arizona for the first closure experiment spanning two years, 1991-1993. He is the author of numerous scientific papers, as well as the books *Life Under Glass: Crucial Lessons and Planetary Stewardship from Two Years in Biosphere 2*, *Pushing Our Limits: Insights from Biosphere 2*, *The Wastewater Gardener: Preserving Our Planet One Flush at a Time*, and the recent title, *Irrationals in Hope of the Impossible: The Origins of Biosphere 2 at Synergia Ranch in the Seventies*.

Below are excerpts from an interview (you can watch the whole interview at [youtube.com/watch?v=JgD9Gu0rO64](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgD9Gu0rO64)) between Devin Gleeson⁴ and Dr. Mark Nelson about community, Synergia Ranch, Institute of Ecotechnics, and his experience in Biosphere 2.

Devin Gleeson: Would you say a little bit about who you are, and about the origins of Synergia Ranch?

Dr. Mark Nelson: Yes, with pleasure. A little cultural background is that I’m a first-generation Jewish American. My parents were from Russia and Poland. They came to the US in the 1920s before the Holocaust, but both of my families were affected by that. As “Jews

without money,” the values that guided their lives were culture and education.

I was a fairly bright student and got a full scholarship to Dartmouth College. The family dictum was, “Go be a doctor. And if you can’t do that, be a lawyer, be a professor.” But when I graduated in 1968, I was imbued with the optimistic, change-the-world-for-the-better spirit of the 1960s. Through some good fortune, I ran into people who had worked with the Theater of All Possibilities⁵, and they had just settled and bought an ecologically devastated property of 160 acres south of Santa Fe. This property became Synergia Ranch. I went there in 1969 when I was 22 years old.

At that time, the program at Synergia Ranch was, “Come for three days, see if you like the work that we’re doing, see if

we like you and there's a good match." When I got there, what attracted me was the three areas that they were focusing on: 1) ecology, 2) enterprise, and 3) theater. Ecologically, they were upgrading the desertified land into an oasis. With enterprise, the idea was to create projects that made us economically independent from the government or foundations. And then theater, which was great especially for an isolated group, because 1) it functions as psychodrama, 2) it creates a world not dominated by mundane logic and rationality, and 3) in theater you learn to use your total organism: emotions, bodily movement, speech, and gesture. Theater also is a way to learn how to play different characters, in different kinds of dramas. So, there's theater on a stage but also the theater of life (remember Shakespeare's "All the World's a stage, and we are just players [actors] upon it"). Becoming an actor and not a reactor is incredibly valuable. Our society claims it is governed by logic and rationality, but it's not really rational because societies and people don't question their assumptions. So-called "rationality" narrowly applied is driving our life-supporting planetary biosphere and its peoples to catastrophe.

A few years into the restoration of Synergia Ranch, John Allen, our lead visionary and a cofounder of the Institute, came up with the idea of Ecotechnics. The simple premise was we know enough about the impacts that we're having on the planet, on local ecosystems, on biodiversity, to do

a much better job of stewardship. The "technics" part of Ecotechnics refers to everything people do—how we build houses, how we live in cities or towns, how we farm, the products we make. With "ecotechnics," the goal is to integrate technics more harmoniously with the local ecosystem and the biomes and ultimately planet Earth.

Devin: From your experience being a part of Synergia Ranch and Institute of Ecotechnics, what role could you see ecovillages and intentional communities playing for future generations?

Dr. Nelson: I don't think we knew the term "intentional community" back at the start of Synergia Ranch or Institute of Ecotechnics, but for several decades starting in New Mexico, I have been an organic farmer and fruit orchardist. One of the wonderful things about being a farmer here in northern New Mexico is there's a really vibrant farming tradition that goes back to how the Native American Pueblo cultures farmed and to the original Spanish who came here. It's a beautifully diverse cultural landscape. And that's community.

There is a wounding in modern society with the atomized, nuclear family where the idea is that you are a great individual and you should only care about your partner and your children and your close family. That's silly. It's crazy. We are social animals. If you look at the history of humanity, for most of our time we were very egalitarian in hunter-gatherer societies. Patriarchy, and the separation it brings, is a recent invention. And I think if we were to judge things by their results, after 20,000 or 30,000 years of patriarchy, I think it's time for it to head into the dustbin of history.

What I love about intentional communities is you get to work with people that normally you might not vibe with. Why do I find that person objectionable? Why do they bother me? What in me do I project onto them? There are all these psychological insights you get living in a community that pull you out of the regular solipsistic-egonarcissistic trip. You learn to work with people you might normally avoid. All human beings are flawed, and I think living in a community helps people come to terms with themselves, which is really important in the pathway forward to the kind of world we want to live in and know we can live in.

Devin: You talk in *Pushing Our Limits* about how disconnected people have become from Earth, our biosphere. How can a person begin to awaken that recognition and consciousness of their own interconnectedness with the planet?

Dr. Nelson: That's a question that I ask myself continually, and I won't pretend to have an answer.

In my view, we modern people are crazy. Indigenous, so-called "primitive," native cultures, including "pagan" religions, I think without exception, start from the premise that we're related to everything and the Earth is sacred (and not in a New Age, la la way).

Dr. Mark Nelson inside Biosphere 2.

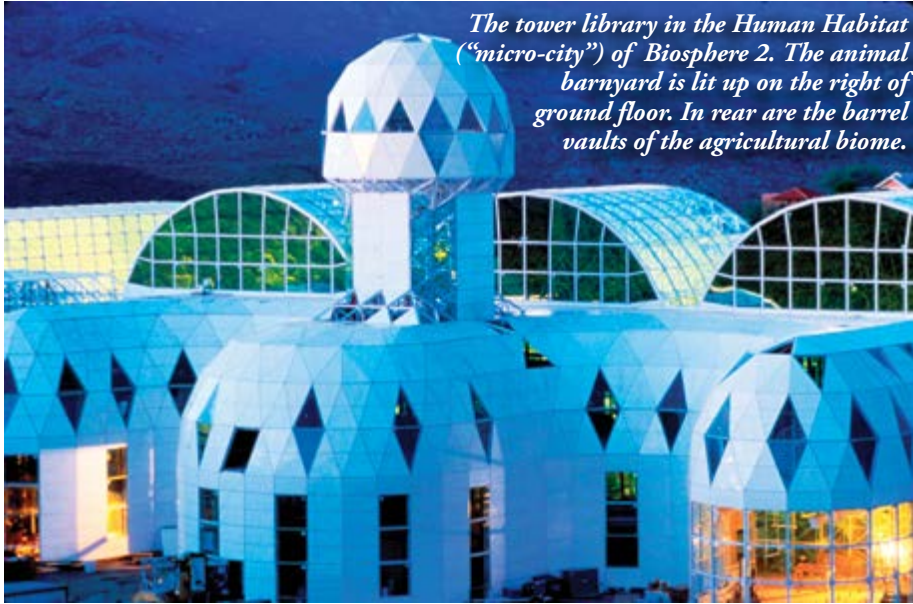


Photo courtesy of Devin Gleeson

Biospherians for first closure experiment, 1991-1993. From left: Linda Leigh, Mark Nelson, Taber MacCallum, Jane Poynter, Sally Silverstone, Gaie Alling, Mark "Laser" Van Thillo, Roy Walford.



Photo courtesy of Devin Gleeson



The tower library in the Human Habitat ("micro-city") of Biosphere 2. The animal barnyard is lit up on the right of ground floor. In rear are the barrel vaults of the agricultural biome.

What I mean is that the reverence for life is now missing. We do not understand that we are fundamentally, absolutely, metabolically connected and part of the biosphere. It is not something out there. And even if you're in Chicago or New York or a Shanghai skyscraper, you are part of the biosphere. If you get that, then that is a return to sanity and a return to reality. And what an amazing relationship to wake up to. You've won the lottery! You are here a part of a four-billion-year-old biosphere. Getting out of the fantasy that you are separate from nature, from all of life and the biosphere, is a kind of rebirth. That's the first step: to really grok, fully realize that truth of your and everyone's existence.

I had been a tree hugger and tree planter already for 15 or 18 years, and then I went for 24 hours into the test module we built at Biosphere 2. The project built it first to test if we could really seal it, truly make it materially closed, and then to run various experiments. I went in, and I tell you, within minutes of closing that door behind me, surrounded by soil and plants, all this theoretical knowledge I know about this connection, I could feel it diffusing through my body because it was so palpable. This visceral reality that I was in connection with this beautiful living world and it was keeping me healthy, and every time I expired, every time I took a breath and released CO₂, these plants were like, "Whoa, yes, we have a human inside now, that's great!"

While I was there, people came by. I was this choleric, martial, aggressive New York City kind of guy, and they came by and said, "God, we've never seen you look so relaxed." It was kind of like I had come home and I was finally in reality.

The simplest way to try to get the sanity that the biosphere and you are not separate is to go out into a natural place, go to the beach, and enjoy the plant life, enjoy the ocean, the tides and waves, what the moon is doing. The Japanese have a practice called "forest bathing" where you go out into the forest. Let the forest heal you. It's what you are looking for. It is what everyone is looking for. The biosphere is your soulmate, and we are all children of the biosphere.

Devin: What was it like for you being in Biosphere 2, and what shifted or began to wake up in your consciousness about your relationship with the biosphere?

Dr. Nelson: The two years that I spent in Biosphere 2 with the seven other brave and courageous pioneers was, in the truest sense, a voyage of discovery. The revelations were continual. It was like a machine for keeping you mindful of your connection to your environment. We began to get that when we talked about our health. It was totally synonymous with the health of Biosphere 2.

One amazing thing is that the cycles that happen on Earth happened at a highly accelerated rate in Biosphere 2. John Allen, who's a great thinker and wordsmith, had this simple sound bite about Biosphere 2. He said: "It's a cyclotron for life sciences." One example of this is the greenhouse gas CO₂. The average CO₂ molecule stays in

Earth's atmosphere about three years before it is absorbed by the ocean or taken up by a plant or some other pathway. In Biosphere 2, this cycle was cut down to one to four days.

So, it took us some time to adapt to this and get in sync with the rhythms. One of the profound things about a small biosphere is that there's nothing anonymous. There are no small actions because everything that we do has an impact and you can see it. We could read the changes through our sensors. We could see, for example, that at 3:45 pm on Tuesday in the Test Module, there was a small spike in CO₂, and Linda, who lived for three weeks inside, would check her journal and tell us: "Oh, I harvested a sweet potato." That small action of disturbing some soil which has 5-10 times the concentration of CO₂ compared to ambient air makes a measurable impact on our sensors.

One of the multidisciplinary marvels of the Biosphere 2 project was that the engineers on the project had to work closely with the ecologists. Considerations that engineers would never normally take into account suddenly became important, because every engineering equipment, material, and process in Biosphere 2 was put there in service of one thing: Life. To me, that's one of the really revolutionary insights from Biosphere 2 and what we should be doing out in our global biosphere. I think everyone should get this kind of ecological literacy. We are all such technophiles in the modern world. What if we equally nurtured our relationship with the biosphere? Technology should enhance and support life. Why do we put up with technologies that pollute and degrade our lives and the life of the biosphere?

In Biosphere 2, technology was a huge supporting player. Maybe it is an overstatement, but metaphorically Biosphere 2 was a cathedral to Gaia, to the world of life. All the technology in there had been scrutinized to see what was compatible and what not. You want to talk about common sense? This should not be revolutionary. This is how we should actually operate.

Devin: You have written that human beings need new stories and new mythologies, that these might facilitate and deepen the connection between humans and the planet. Could you say more about that?

Dr. Nelson: Yes, all credit to long-term friend and inspiration, visionary novelist William Burroughs. He suggested in his work that we need new stories, a new mythology, for our current age. He posited that one of the principles of the new mythologies would be that people and forces are villains and heroes depending on their actions towards our biosphere. It's not that people are evil. A lot of the damage that's happening to the earth is just the momentum and the inertia of wrong ideas and wrong concepts of what really is economic. How can anything be considered good economics if it's unsustainable, if it damages people, their cultures, their local ecosystems, and ultimately Earth's biosphere? So, yes, we need to create new stories where heroes and villains are measured by their intentions towards the planet.

I think Burroughs' point was if you look at the Greek myths—Oedipus, for example—it's like, "Oh great, I'm condemned to kill my father and sleep with my mother." And there's a reality to that, I think, because the Greek myths came from a patriarchal culture, which is why there's so many evil, powerful women in Greek myths: patriarchal propaganda. So, critically looking at these stories and how they twist the human mind is also very helpful as we leave room for new, more life-affirming mythologies.

Devin: We were talking a bit about communities and ecovillages before. What would you say is needed in an ecovillage or intentional community for projects to actually take off and have the foundation they need to be successful?

Dr. Nelson: Great question. I don't think there's a definitive answer to these things. One thing we learned at the Institute of Ecotechnics is that it is important to have a shared common objective, even a simple one. Our throughline at Synergia Ranch was to make into an oasis this desertified land in New Mexico—to make an ecological oasis, a psychological, artistic, cultural oasis.

Another really important thing is to own the land. That was always a chal-

lenge for Ecotechnics where we operate on a bare-bones budget, but it also encouraged enterprise. Ownership of the land gives you security. Owning the means of production is also really important in lowering the cost of living and in empowering yourself. You cannot learn by doing if you don't have the tools and equipment to do stuff, including building your infrastructure, buildings and homes. With means of production, you can build the spaces yourself and you don't have to pay for every specialized thing. And, I mean, hats off to John Allen, because he decided one of our enterprises would be a construction firm. We built over 30 adobe houses in Santa Fe, and it was set up so that everybody would work on different crews and learn every step of the house construction. I'm all for education, but I think there's a limit to academic education. We got a very different education working with our hands, and I think schools really should let their students do this, to encourage them to get involved with life. IE's motto has always been you learn by doing. And if you have little money and need to accomplish something, that's also necessary.

John Allen used to joke that Ecotechnics was tapping into two types of traditional schools: the School of Nuts and Bolts and the School of Sink or Swim. He put me in charge of gardens and trees, which I knew nothing about. How deep to plant tree seedlings isn't so obvious to an overeducated urbanite like myself. But, you know, bit by bit, you learn. You follow your bliss, like Joseph Campbell said.

For people who are living in communities or thinking about it, I highly recommend *Irrationals in Hope of the Impossible*, because that is really an in-depth telling of the struggle and difficulties of getting things going at Synergia Ranch and the early years of ecotechnics.

Devin: Any last words for now?

Dr. Nelson: One of the meditations that we do includes courage in adversity, compassion for suffering, friendliness to happiness, appreciation of achievement, and equanimity to stupidity. All of these are for yourself and also the people around you. So, it's a good communal mantra: courage, compassion, friendliness, appreciation, and equanimity. And as they say, "Nothing ventured, Nothing gained." Why not dream some big dreams and then gather like-minded people and work to put them into action? Step by lucky step... Good luck! 🐦

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

Dr. Mark Nelson is a Founding Director of the Institute of Ecotechnics, a former Biospherian, and a prolific author. For a fuller profile of Mark see the beginning of this article.



View of the Biosphere 2 farm from high in the spaceframe. Along left are the planting boxes on the IAB balcony.

C. Alan Morgan

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1. marknelsonbiospherian.com
 2. ecotechnics.edu
 3. wastewatergardens.net
 4. devingleeson.mystrikingly.com
 5. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theater_of_All_Possibilities

Community Living and Initiations into Adulthood as an Alternative Path for Young Adults

By Gabriela Fagundes Moreira



I can remember my first day at University, a bright blue February day in Minas Gerais, southwest Brazil. The fresh breeze of the humid summer blew on my neck. The sun was so piercing you had to squint your eyes or use your hands to shade your forehead. Sitting here, in front of this computer, four years and two months later, I can still see myself going to the bathroom and looking at the mirror. As I stared at my eyes I noticed them gradually filling with a thick wall of fluid. I only had one thought: Why am I here?

My tears that day were not from sorrow, something I dared not feel for fear the sorrow would never end, but instead the tears came from clarity. *I'm living someone else's life.*

I decided that day to live a life of my own, one made by my own hands. I was well prepared for failing. It was time to move forward.

Joseph Campbell describes that for those in whom a dominant mythology still works, there is an experience both in accord with the social order, and in apparent harmony with the universe. If the symbols and signs of capitalism, for example, work for you, then you have a set of associated values, and there is a path you can take: working for a corporation, having one or two children, owning a house, taking vacations. For some, however, the authorized signs, such as church, money, and having a linear life, no longer work. What inevitably follows for these

individuals is a sense both of dissociation from the local social nexus, and of quest, within and without, for life, for “meaning.” There begins the Hero’s Journey.

When I look at my generation, what people call Generation Z, I see that most of the signs, symbols, and paths offered don’t work any longer. At the same time, my generation doesn’t have the time or the guidance to undergo our own hero’s journey, so a lot of us get stuck in a place of no meaning. At this point Intentional Communities and Initiatory Process into Adulthood play crucial roles.

When I was around 12, I started reading about ecocide. One day I asked one of my teachers: If the system is killing animals, plants, all kinds of life, and most people are unhappy, why are we still doing the same? Why am I going to school? Why are you going to the work you hate? Why are we not trying something else?

When I was 15 I discovered that we, as a species, organize ourselves in a way that makes us completely dependent on our life in the very system that is killing the future possibility of life for human and nonhuman beings.

Later on, when I was 19, I went traveling around the world and started to spend time living in communities. I discovered human beings have a secret deal to keep ourselves sleeping and sacrificing everything—the time with the ones we love most,

the trees that give us oxygen, the soil that provides us food. The deal is, we sacrifice all in exchange for receiving luxuries and comfort stuff that would not have been dreamed of by any Roman king or even anyone 150 years ago: instantaneous transportation and communication, entertainment via more than eight billion channels, refrigeration, food at the supermarket...

I grew up thinking that the food I ate came from the grocery store, that the water I drank came from the tap, that the computer I was typing on came from the store, and the shelter I slept in came from a business. I believed that I had to become somebody, doing things that I had to do and that I hated, so that I could earn money to buy food, water, and shelter, so that I could survive.

If you experience that the water comes from a tap and your food comes from the supermarket, you will defend to the death the system that brings those to you, because your life depends on it. Simultaneously you will put up with any indignity because your life depends on it. As Derrick Jensen incisively observes, **the system inserted itself between us and the source**

of life. We got used to all the comfort of cities and we cut our direct connection with the source of life itself, the planet earth.

While living in intentional communities over the last three years, I gained experiential learning and material knowledge of Life and how to live. On the external level, learning basic earth skills such as planting crops and vegetables, killing and preparing meat, helping build a hut, constructing a compost toilet, making fire, learning to harvest water from the rain, gave me enough disidentification from the comfortable life I was used to in big cities. I fished for the first time and looked at the eyes of this animal as he was dying in my hands and giving his life to feed me. I spent days sleeping outside in a tent, close to a river, and experiencing that if I don't have money I'm not gonna die. I learned about permaculture and how to cultivate crops in a way to get the basics to eat. I've learned to build a tiny house using clay and wood. I experienced that the food I eat comes from the soil, and that the water I drink comes from the springs; and that the computer I'm using to type these words comes from



Photos courtesy of Gabriela Fagundes Moreira



the mines, where there are slaves working and dying every day.

I started to consider questions that I did not previously ask myself, such as: When I flush the toilet, where does my shit go? I remember the first time I went to the city after spending one month in Inlakesh, an intentional community in Chiapas, Mexico: tears filled my eyes from shitting in the water and knowing how much water is used to move the shit away.

Beyond merely the basic physical skills that were bringing me close to Reality and ungluing my attachment to the system, I was being initiated into being an Adult human being.

Initiations into Adulthood are processes, trainings, and spaces through which a person becomes capable of taking higher levels of responsibility. Through initiations into adulthood a person shifts from being like a planet into becoming a star. A planet consumes more energy than it radiates. A star radiates more energy than it consumes. When a person authentically manifests her or his path into adulthood she or he shifts from absorbing and consuming into creating, proposing, sourcing. An initiation can also be something that you are very scared to do, where your Being will expand from taking that risk. For some people, traveling alone to a different country, to go camping alone, to walk with nothing on them and get lost, to go on a boat trip, to live without money, can be initiations.

One of the initiations into adulthood I went through, when living in a community in the south of Brazil, was joining a Rage Club. In this space I was initiated into feeling from 0 to 100 percent of my anger and I learned to own my anger, instead of being owned by this energy. I gained the capacity to stop being a victim of my feelings and from there I could take more responsibility in my life. The way this manifested practically was that I started to ask questions I have never asked before and make offers that scared me. I asked a person, “I want to hold your hand. Do you want that?” I stopped faking when I’m scared, and laughing when I want to cry. I saw a man trying to force his partner into a taxi in Mexico and I came over to him and said with 35 percent anger, “She said no. Let her go. It is her decision.”

In this self-made curriculum I’m on over the last years, I experienced transformational and initiatory spaces and learned internal skills as well that created a stable structure in my being so I could take higher levels of responsibility. I learned to feel, from 0 to 100 percent, my anger, fear, sadness, and joy, pure and un-mixed, and use their energy and information to communicate,

ask, write, create. I learned how to navigate conflicts and separate what is mine and what is from the other person. I learned to be centered and grounded. I learned to choose what is not offered on the menu and to create a circle out of hierarchical structure. I learned to hold space and navigate transformational and high-level feelings. I learned to be in the ongoing alchemy of my underworld and use it as a resource for creativity and non-linearity. I learned to be able to generate money anywhere, out of nothing. I learned about my non-material values and that I can find a roof and food wherever I am in the world. I learned to fail, and learned to love being incompetent in things.

This could be the basis for the education of young adults in the 21st century.

In this century, it is more than time that we young adults take a stand to learn the skills that this time requires from us. The education and formation that Universities offer nowadays, in general, is obsolete. It does not prepare you for what is to come. It does not build any ground for you to be connected with the source of Life and serve the gifts you bring into the world and to your community. We did not evolve to be sitting in chairs in front of screens for hours every day.

Education nowadays could be about offering tools and guidance for young adults to utilize in their journey of inventing and discovering their path. Education could be about Initiations: process, training, and experiences that enable the person to take more responsibility, to be more fully conscious in action, in Reality, in daily life. 🍷

Gabriela Fagundes Moreira graduated from a residential high school in Rio de Janeiro, spent three weeks (too many) studying Tourism at UFMG (Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais), and since then has designed her own curriculum from Life—traveling the world to live and work in communities, do training in regenerative design, permaculture, theater, communication, and writing, and become a Possibility Manager. Today she works with reconnecting the physical, mental, emotional, energetic, and archetypal bodies and catalyzing shifts in consciousness with the purpose of allowing us to create Regenerative Cultures. She does this through creative, evolutionary, transformational, and healing processes for individuals, couples, and groups in training and coaching sessions. To learn more, visit www.gabrielifagundes.com/en, 1startnow.mystrikingly.com, rageclub.org, and possibilitymanagement.org.

Rethinking the Future of Intentional Communities

By Sky Blue

The following is an edited, partial transcript of a talk given during a Foundation for Intentional Community webinar on June 14, 2024, inspired by the author's longer paper posted in January 2024 at incommunity.us/where-do-we-go-from-here.

One of my starting premises is that, given the scope and scale of the world and its problems, intentional communities (ICs) are not having a significant impact. I'm not saying they're having no impact. But they could be having a lot more, and I think we have a responsibility to try to maximize their potential.

I think a fundamental shift in focus is needed for ICs.

ICs have a dual purpose: being nice places to live and being vehicles for social change. Because of mainstream socialization and pressures, the gravity will always be towards nice places to live.

What's wrong with that?

It's not what the world needs from us.

I think we're all very aware here of the potentially existential self-created problems we face. I think the particular confluence of capitalism, climate change, individualism, and trauma we're dealing with is making the world an increasingly challenging place to survive, and it's getting increasingly challenging to start or simply maintain existings ICs.

From what I can see most ICs are struggling to some degree or another right now.

I'm not exactly a doomsdayist, but I do believe that eventually our nice places to live will collapse under the pressure, or will just get of kind assimilated into more conventional lifestyles, or will get rolled over by some disaster or another.

Even if you don't think that's going to happen, it's undeniable that the current situation in the world already really sucks for a lot of people.

Starting and living in ICs is a privilege, and we have a responsibility to leverage that privilege. If ICs are supposed to be models for things like regenerative lifestyles, cooperative governance, equitable economic systems, healthy interpersonal relationships and culture, now is the time to bring those things to bear on the surrounding systems and culture ICs find themselves in.

ICs as they currently exist are too small to have the kind of impact needed or to be sustainable or survive on their own. Total self-sufficiency for a community of even a few hundred people in the world today is an illusion. And even if it were possible, the chances of survival against external pressures are slim to none.

We have to be thinking on local and regional scales, and we have to see ourselves as part of a larger movement.

We need to find the other people and organizations in our areas, foster relationships of mutual aid and solidarity, and work together towards collective liberation from oppressive and exploitive systems.

We need to be active players in helping shift local and regional governance, economic, social, and culture systems.

And I particularly want to highlight the government part of things. I think we really hamstring ourselves by isolating ourselves from local governance. Local government is where a lot of the power lies to actually improve people's daily lives. We need to be taking over local government. But we can't do that just by ourselves. We need to be creating coalitions of local and regional cooperative and community-based organiza-

Living in community is hard and that's the point. We're trying to address the problems of society in systemic and holistic ways, so of course all of the external and internal crap is going to confront us in the process of creating and living in intentional community.

Being in service to a purpose greater than ourselves is one of the best ways to mitigate a lot of the problems we face.

tions to be effective in that.

Part of what I'm suggesting is that ICs take that dual purpose and embed making nice places to live inside of the purpose of social transformation. Have making nice places to live be part of the strategy of social transformation, but have the central purpose be social transformation.

The goal also shouldn't just be to make more and more intentional communities, though I think that should be part of the strategy. But if intentional communities are responses to the problems of society, the goal should be to try to help solve those problems, to use intentional communities as vehicles to make the world a place where intentional communities aren't needed in the same way they are today.

As individuals we need a purpose that is greater than ourselves to give our lives a sense of meaning and fulfillment and satisfaction. This extends to communities. Communities need a purpose beyond themselves, greater than just existing. This is what provides an inspiring context to make all the challenges feel worth it.

Being in service to a purpose greater than ourselves is one of the best ways to mitigate a lot of the problems we face, and losing touch with a sense of shared purpose is usually one of the biggest contributors to those problems. And no doubt, we face a lot of problems.

I'm certainly not saying any of this is easy and I definitely don't think there are any easy answers

Also, while most communities are struggling, some are doing fine.

Some are doing great work to model and educate, and I think that's important, but what I see is still mostly pretty inward-focused. It's mostly about bringing people to communities, not about communities engaging with other organizations beyond their property lines. I'm not saying don't do the former, I'm saying the latter needs a lot more energy and attention.

And some are more engaged locally, but even there, they still tend to be fairly isolated from other ICs, other than the informal relationships between individual members of different communities, or through loose association with networking organizations like the FIC. The ICs that are doing well should really be extending a hand to the communities that are struggling, and helping them all come together more to support each other.

So, what am I suggesting?

I think there are people in just about every intentional community out there who see the need for their communities to come together more, and the need for communities to engage with each other and other cooperative organizations more to have a greater impact. But they tend to be in the minority, feel alone and isolated, and meet a lot of resistance or apathy when they try to push their communities.

If more people in communities don't step up and speak out about the need to shift things, things won't change in communities, and if things don't change in communities, nothing is going to happen because anything that is going to happen in the movement is going to have to start in the communities that make up the movement.

And I think what this will take is more individuals taking on their personal work to break out of the kinds of patterns and baggage we all bring into community from the mainstream. We don't just magically leave all that stuff behind when we move to community, and it's usually infected the design of our communities to begin with, too. We're all addicts of the dysfunction of mainstream culture, and we need to see ourselves as being in a recovery program and really take on that work of healing so that we have the personal and collective capacity to take on the larger work that needs to be done.

But if more people in more communities can do their personal work, come together more, and get their communities to see they need to shift and be more broadly engaged, this is what I think ICs should be leaning into more. That means really being in service to and centering a shared sense of greater purpose.

I think we need to continue to develop really thoughtful and effective cooperative governance systems, really lean into egalitarian economic and ownership models based on mutual aid and solidarity, and cultivate more in the way of personal growth and healthy culture.

What helps drive all this is more sharing. At their core, I believe ICs are about sharing: sharing lives, sharing resources, sharing purpose. The more we can break out of our individualism both in terms of how that comes through our own behavior and in the design of our communities, and lean into sharing, particularly from an economic point of view, that's where we can generate the personal and collective capacity needed.

One of the things I've been saying a lot lately is that living in community is hard and that's the point. What I mean by that is that we're trying to do something fundamentally different from what mainstream society wants us to do and has trained us to do. We're trying to address the problems of society in systemic and holistic ways, so of course all of the external and internal crap is going to confront us in the process of creating and living in intentional community.

I think a lot of the problems that we run into as individuals living in community, as communities, and in the movement of communities, happen because we don't recognize that. We don't see the work that needs to be done. I think the more we embrace the challenges as central to what it is that we're doing, the better our shot at finding a way through. 🐦

Sky Blue (they/them) has been embedded in the Intentional Communities Movement for over 25 years as a communitarian, activist, and consultant. You can find out more about them and their work at www.incommunity.us.

The Role of Ecovillages and Transition Towns in the Revolution

By *Ted Trainer*

I was surprised and disturbed by a recent long discussion of the current Ecovillage scene by Sky Blue (incommunity.us/where-do-we-go-from-here). Sky's been a participant in the movement for decades and is very worried about it—concerned about internal preoccupations, confusion re goals, individualistic baggage brought in from mainstream society, and especially lack of mission. (That discussion uses the blanket term “intentional community,” more common in the United States, but Sky's observations apply equally to the term “ecovillage,” more common here in Australia and worldwide.) Sky raises the issues well but admits to being less than confident that they can be addressed successfully.

Following are some thoughts which I hope might help to gear the Ecovillage and Transition Town movements more effectively to the great transition. I believe the contribution of ecovillages and transition towns will be crucial and huge, but we need to think about where we are going.

The many articles I have written on these two movements usually begin by insisting that if we make it through to a sustainable and just society it can only be via a Transition Towns movement of some kind, and that the Ecovillage provides the general form to which the towns must aspire. But a number of times I have expressed concern about the present state of these movements. My major worry has been that there has been far too little thinking about the best way these movements can contribute to the transition.

Ecovillages

Ecovillages often claim to be modeling or prefiguring necessary new ways, and this is clearly correct, but big questions remain. For instance, how do we deal with the basic “socialist” critique that ecovillages are just a nice lifestyle option that only a few can afford to escape to, and that they do not help with the main game, which has to be getting rid of consumer-capitalism? I think there is a good answer to this question (below) but neither of the movements focuses on such political questions, and in fact they have been advised to avoid them. (For instance, Transition Towns people have been told to “just do stuff.”) I worry that the movements have lacked thinking about transition theory.

And there are major issues beyond the village to think out, such as how are the wider regional and national economies to be organised to enable the ecovillages to

Ecovillages can help us see the immense benefits of living in more cooperative, self-sufficient, localised, ecologically-sustainable ways.



Photos by Chris Roth



get the many goods they cannot produce for themselves? How do village and town initiatives connect with the need to replace the capitalist system which presently supplies these goods? Is it assumed that if we just keep building local ventures we will eventually have replaced capitalism? Sky Blue sees ecovillages as preoccupied, bogged down, in issues that are way below these heights—internal difficulties, interpersonal wrangles, grappling with local government impediments, lacking energy—and unclear where they are going.

It is in general very difficult to establish an ecovillage. It takes years of effort by a heroically determined and ideologically committed small group to get through the planning bureaucracies, to raise the money to purchase land, and then to build. And most of the world's people do not want to live in such tightly communal ways. Thus my first main point here is that ecovillages can never become more than a small proportion of the planet's settlements. So what is their goal, their role?

We do not all have to live in ecovillages in order to save the planet. But we do have to live in settlements that have many of their basic elements. As I see it the very important role of ecovillages is to show us *the desirability, the benefits of moving towards* the ways that ecovillages exhibit. It is not to get us to form more ecovillages (though that's desirable, especially in poorer countries). It is to help us to see the immense benefits of living in more cooperative, self-sufficient, localised, ecologically-sustainable ways, focused on needs and welfare and non-material sources of life satisfaction and not driven by profit and market forces.

My concern here is with the lack of such accounts being distributed within other than ecovillage communications such as COMMUNITIES. There are some impressive descriptions in publications such as *Resilience* of how ecovillages achieve low footprints, low-cost housing, cooperative gardens, low per capita resource use, etc. There are also some good indications of cooperative self-governing practices. But even in these alternative publications I have encountered few explanations of the economic situation, the priority of simplicity, and most importantly of what it is like to live there, in the sense of subjective impressions, thoughts and feelings, of security, camaraderie, peace of mind, life goals, time available to spend doing what, etc. I have attempted to indicate some of these elements in our video (youtube.com/watch?v=L9WSfGGdZRs) and a fictional account (thesimplerway.info/THEWAYReport.htm). The point is that it is most important to help people in the mainstream understand these huge quality-of-life benefits of the alternative way we are advocating.

Most people out there are stressed and discontented with the way things are, and our biggest health problems now are probably loneliness and depression. But the main reason they put up with it all is that they do not see how good things could be if they were able to live in the ways we are trying to establish. So the most subversive/revolutionary activity we can undertake is simply to help them see this.

We need to be able to provide them with descriptions of communities in which people are secure, in control of their collective fate, don't have to work hard, have access to caring comrades, participate in self-government, live in beautiful humble earth-built houses, are content with sufficiency, enjoy green environments containing animals and beautiful gardens, enjoy a relaxed pace with plenty of time for arts and crafts etc., and accounts which explain the structures and arrangements that make these benefits possible.

Transition Towns

Again, if we get to a sustainable and just world it can only be via a grassroots Transition Towns movement of some kind. As I see it, possibly the most important institution in the new society we must build is the neighbourhood, the around 40 houses closest to yours. This is about the number of people you can know well. They will be your inner community, within a small town containing many similar neighbourhoods. The neighbourhood will contain commons, cooperatives, orchards, animals, fish ponds and woodlots, community gardens and a centre (disused petrol station) with a workshop, library, art gallery, tool library, craft rooms, recycling racks, meeting place and mini-café, mostly on the land that used to be streets before we dug them up. Our committees and working bees will maintain the neighbourhood, for example pruning the fruit trees in the parks. Much produce will be “free” for the taking. Because we will be living frugally and getting many things from the commons, we will probably have to work for money only two days a week.

The town will be made up of many of these neighbourhoods, with additional arrangements such as town assemblies and town-level committees and working

bees. (For details see thesimplerway.info/THEALTSOCLong.htm.)

I'd like to see the Ecovillage movement energetically geared *primarily* to spreading this kind of vision. At present I don't see the movement as anywhere near sufficiently focused on this "mission." Much of it seems to me to be intended to achieve, as Sky Blue is saying, a pleasant escape for a few. Much of it is indeed inspiring but it's no good it just being there, we have to tell the mainstream about it. The GEN website offers a dazzling array of ventures but we are not told why they are important or their relevance for saving the planet.

This brings us to the question, what is the role of the town in the revolution? How do we think the Transition Towns movement is going to achieve or contribute to the creation of a sustainable and just new world? I have said that I see it as absolutely crucial in that quest, but again there are important concerns that are not being focused on.

The major goal of the movement is usually seen as "resilience." I don't agree with this. The goal should be getting the town into *a form that would enable all the world's people to live in sustainable and just ways*. That form would indeed be resilient but if that is the supreme goal then we could achieve it by buying in lots of energy-intensive kit using up far more than our fair share of the world's resources. Elon Musk is spending a few hundred million dollars doing that prepping on a Hawaiian island. But if we want to model an ecologically sustainable and just society that all could share, our supreme concern would have to be radical localism, self-sufficiency and simplicity in lifestyles and systems, and thus a high level of local self-sufficiency, probably with per capita resource consumption around 10 percent of present rich-world averages. (The case for this number is given here: thesimplerway.info/DegrowthHowMuch.html.) Some ecovillages do this, notably Dancing Rabbit (thesimplerway.info/DancingRabbit.html), but the movement does not stress that this is the essential goal for sustainability.

Why should it be the goal? Because this is the only way to achieve the very great reductions needed in resource and

environmental impacts. Our study of egg supply (thesimplerway.info/Eggs.html) demonstrates this. The supermarket egg involves huge industrial inputs, feed mills, trucks, chemicals, waste removal, electricity and oil, insurance, and expensive techies. But we found that an egg from the backyard pen or the nearby co-op needs almost none of these inputs and its energy and dollar cost can be under one percent of those of the supermarket egg—and the "wastes" can go to nearby compost heaps and methane producing digesters on their way to the gardens, closing the nutrient loop and eliminating the need for sewers. It can be the same for many other products.

Your neighbourhood and your town will have to import necessities from the surrounding region, and some from the national and international economies. We cannot get to be a sustainable nation unless and until these economies have been radically changed. How can the Transition Town movement contribute to that? At present this is one more very important question the movement seems not to be concerned about. In fact the degrowth movement as a whole seems not to recognize the magnitude of this "Degrowth conundrum." How on earth are we going to change an economy and a culture that must have high levels of consumption, and constant growth in them, to be instead full of frugal Dancing Rabbits that are content without growth? (See thesimplerway.info/DEGROWTHSTRAT.pdf.)

Many inspiring things are happening in the movement but many of these take the form of isolated projects—an orchard here, a swap-shop there, not connected or integrated into a town "plan" or vision, and struggling to function within a town economy driven by market forces and profit. What is the implicit rationale? Again is it that just by establishing alternative projects here and there we will eventually end up with the kind of town we want, within the kind of national society we want?

As I see it the key to the way forward is to adopt the goal of eventually having *taken collective citizen control of the town*, so that we are able to decide what will be done and how it will run. We want its fate not left to be determined by investors or market forces or profit. Our town participatory assemblies will identify needs and priorities and fix them, within integrated/interconnected systems. (For instance all "wastes" go to our nearby gardens, fish tanks, methane digesters, and small farms.) Is there unemployment around here? Well let's establish an agency to enable dumped people to work in new cooperatives producing things they and we need; that's what the Catalan Integral Cooperative (CIC) has done (see thesimplerway.info/CATALAN.html).

One of the difficulties on this path is how to relate to official bodies like councils





and the Chamber of Commerce which might be sympathetic in the short run but which have fundamentally different goals in the long run. These agencies typically take it for granted that what the town needs is more business turnover, more tourists, more jobs, more capacity to purchase and to pay rates. Degrowth to frugal ways which dramatically reduce spending is not in their interests. Do we refuse to have anything to do with them, as the CIC chooses? Or would it be best to accept whatever assistance we can get from them until they realise what we are up to and the good will dries up?

Most current Transition Towns initiatives seem not to constitute any challenge to the fundamental town economic system which is driven by market forces, property values, etc.; they are designed to work within it, for instance selling some of the community garden vegetables to restaurants. The CIC refuses to work with the state or market systems, setting up its own alternative ways.

Related is the effort to derive assistance from “anchor institutions,” for instance to persuade hospitals to purchase supplies from the locality instead of from distant transnational firms. This might be a good way to kickstart local ventures but it is not likely to be viable as the global scene deteriorates and governments cut spending drastically.

So we need to keep in mind that the ultimate Transition Towns goal is a totally different system to that presently evident in towns. At present the town is embedded in a grossly unsustainable and unjust global economy and dependent on it for more or less everything it can't produce, and therefore the town's people are locked into working for it. Our goal ought to be to establish a system that is highly independent of the national let alone the global economy, highly localised and self-sufficient, not driven by profit or market forces, highly collectivist as distinct from individualistic, and above all consuming a minimum and not obsessed with material values.

Again this vision is unlikely to be realised by establishing a community garden here and a swap shop there. The alternative vision isn't going to gain any traction until and unless the town becomes strongly committed to it and works out how it is going to transform the town accordingly.

I'm not implying I have good answers to these questions but I am saying we need to go well beyond “just doing stuff” and to think hard about them. Otherwise scarce energy will go into projects that are futile (such as some of the alternative currency schemes).

The revolution depends entirely on “ideology,” on whether or not sufficient numbers come to hold the crucial ideas and values, especially to see that a) the consumer-capitalist way has to be scrapped because it is decreasingly capable of providing for us and is leading to catastrophic global breakdown, and b) there is an attractive and workable alternative. So the most important thing we should be doing is not demanding that governments implement degrowth policies, or learning how to handle an AK-47; it is helping more people to adopt this perspective. Few are in as good a position to do this as those in Ecovillage and Transition Towns movements.

That marvellous book *The Dawn of Everything* by Graeber and Wengrow ([see gen-us.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Communities-No.-197-Review-The-Dawn-of-Everything.pdf](http://gen-us.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Communities-No.-197-Review-The-Dawn-of-Everything.pdf)) grapples with how Western “civilisation” got stuck with its lamentable commitment to hierarchy, power, domination, inequality, and rule by kings, tyrants, elites, and governments. For at least 10,000 years this social form has inflicted oppression, poverty and deprivation, patriarchy, and immense suffering and warfare on most people. But the book points out that there have been societies that have not taken this path. Some have been remarkable and admirable examples of classical anarchism, thoroughly participatory democracies of equals, without top-down power, bureaucracies, privilege, class distinctions, armies, or acquisitiveness, yet they have been large, complex, stable and harmonious, and ecologically sustainable.

Isn't that what increasing numbers are turning towards today in Ecovillage, Transition Towns, Degrowth and related movements? Is there anything more important to be for than contributing to that transition, that historically monumental liberation? If we achieve it, it will have been by far the most important revolution in our history. Seems to me that contributing to it is the ideal mission for Ecovillagers. 🌱

Ted Trainer was a Conjoint Lecturer in the School of Social Work, University of New South Wales. His main interests have been global problems, sustainability issues, radical critiques of the economy, alternative social forms and the transition to them. He has written numerous books and articles on these topics, including Abandon Affluence, Zed Books, 1985, The Conserver Society: Alternatives for Sustainability, Zed Books, 1995, Saving the Environment: What It Will Take, University of UNSW Press, 1998, Renewable Energy Cannot Sustain A Consumer Society, Springer, 2007, The Transition to a Sustainable and Just Society, Envirobook, 2010, and The Collected Writings of Ted Trainer, S. Alexander and J. Rutherford eds., Simplicity Institute, 2019. He is also developing Pigface Point, an alternative lifestyle educational site near Sydney, and a website, thesimplerway.info, for use by critical global educators and activists.



THE FUTURE IS COOPERATIVE: What might it look like and how do we get there?

By Thomas Mengel

“Such fun!” said one member of Killick Coast North Seniors Co-operative (KCN Seniors Co-op)¹. We had just finished playing the game Co-opoly² at our weekly Games Night in celebration of Co-op Week 2024 (October 13-19 in Canada). Ten players at two tables were each assigned individual roles as members of a cooperative. To win, each cooperative must master various challenges and ultimately co-create a second cooperative for the community. If individual members, or the cooperative, run out of resources, all members of that cooperative lose the game.

“Very different, very different...,” commented another player comparing it to competitive and profit-oriented games like Monopoly or Rumoli, where one or only a few individual players win while others lose.

Everyone loved the fun activities and communal decision-making, much like in the three million existing cooperatives worldwide with over one billion members³.

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“Cooperatives build a better world”
“Cooperatives build prosperity for all”
“The Future is Cooperative”⁴

The global headlines above frame an essential story, and experts in the field agree: cooperatives are promising scenarios for future economic and communal development⁵. Yet

while cooperatives have had a longstanding presence and significant impact in economic theory and practice, they haven’t yet reached their future potential. They are continuously underestimated and overlooked. While they don’t seem to fit the predominant competitive and neoliberal paradigm of competitive capitalism, they may play a major role in overcoming the crisis of capitalism.

Social care systems have declined at least since the 1990s. Concerns about various social issues have increased ever since. They have been exacerbated due to the financial crisis in 2008, through “government neglect,” and because of the “catastrophic effects” of market ideas invading social policy⁶. The worsening housing crisis in result of commodifying a scarce resource is one example⁷. Seniors’ care is another one, pointing to social care being in disarray, worsened by the demographics of population aging.

We desperately need a value shift, changing the paradigm from individualistic competition and charity-driven social policy to the cooperative values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity⁸. We need to build reciprocal relationships where we give and take, based on equality, equity, and solidarity. And we need to implement restorative justice as “a form of cooperative problem-solving which can create citizens for a more just society”⁹. Only then may we be able to transform our capitalist societies with top-down charitable actions disguised as social policy to a bottom-up humanized economy¹⁰.

KCN Seniors Co-op Games Night, October 17, 2024.



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At KCN Seniors Co-op in rural Newfoundland, older adults have taken ownership of existing or foreseen challenges and helped co-create future solutions: seniors wanting to age well in their own homes while previously lacking the services and a support network helping them do so. In participatory workshops, community members imagined their preferred futures and jointly identified current and future needs of the community.

They also helped identify a fee structure that would ensure that membership was affordable to all while also supporting the sustainability goal of the organization.

Both in the game—which is a fun way of simulating processes that really exist¹¹—and in conversations about KCN Seniors Co-op, the cooperative values were discussed. In addition, honesty, openness, social responsibility, and caring for others, together with the framework of gender equity, diversity, inclusion, belonging, and anti-racism, were adopted as guiding values for the co-op.

Values become lived experience through the social events, common meals, and service activities provided by volunteers and co-op members (e.g., help with transportation, technology coaching, grocery shopping, and hot meal delivery).

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Lived experience, simulation in games, and sharing of stories help develop and sustain community. Jointly envisioning our preferred futures helps forge the path to get there and creates the memories that will sustain community. It builds resilience and creates the flexibility that is needed to adapt to changes and challenges experienced by the community (members) on their journey.

Sustainable community development requires participatory and cooperative leadership that maintains the excitement for sustainable implementation and includes the flexibility for adaptations in the future. While still rare in comparison to the predominant top-heavy leadership models, alternative concepts that are more aligned with cooperative approaches and values do exist.

The communal and futures-oriented model of leadership, which I had proposed as a concept in September 2020¹², has helped develop the cooperative practice of KCN Seniors Co-op. The following lists the attitudes, skills, and behaviours required by the model and describes how they are implemented in our co-op, including the remaining challenges:

- **Imagine the future, act globally, consider the local; identify and orient towards values shared by all stakeholders.**

Imagining a different future for themselves and for their communities was the trigger for starting KCN Seniors Co-op and it is the core of its further development. Local needs and the connection to provincial, national, and international organizations informed the purpose and mission of the co-op. Collaboratively stakeholders identified the shared and foundational values. The cooperative model and values are part of the co-op's DNA. They also strongly align with core elements of leadership and community development for the future¹³. The power of and passion for imagination and values-orientation must be maintained by the cooperative over the continuous changes to its membership and stakeholder base.

- **Empathize with and consider on all levels and from all perspectives; shared decision-making, problem-solving, leadership across human and non-human systems; focus on relationships and relational aspects.**

Cooperative governance and consent-oriented decision-making, as implemented in KCN Seniors Co-op, focuses on relations and relationship-building among members and with other stakeholders. Using a dedicated IT-platform to administer and to support the human relations and service processes allowed to create the first steps of an integrated leadership system freeing up the human actors to focus on relationship-building. Mastering the challenge to maintain these systems from an ethical and people-centred perspective will remain an ongoing task and responsibility.

- **Imagine and consider non-linear developments and co-existence of often paradoxical phenomena.**

The co-creation of cooperative organizations like KCN Seniors Co-op evolves in cycles (two-dimensional) or even spirals (three-dimensional): While the first phase from inception to

incorporation completes the first cycle (spiralling upwards to a higher level), new members coming on board and infusing new ideas and solutions to the cooperative will restart the cycle of communal and cooperative development. The membership-driven leadership processes of a cooperative must acknowledge and incorporate that in their decision-making. To nurture itself, to remain sustainable, and to grow organically, the community needs to hold and harvest the ever-present paradoxes of past and future, up and down, back and forth.

• **Leadership as risky choreographic artistry.**

Cooperative decision-making models like the consent-oriented rules of procedure that are part of KCN Seniors Co-op’s bylaws constantly challenge traditional and often simplistic leadership approaches (e.g., top-down, majority rules, etc.). Members often change (leadership) roles to maintain the cooperative processes, they intentionally and openly remain vulnerable to enable consent-oriented decision-making, and—like trapeze artists—they swing back and forth, hold and let go, and pause and take the leap to support each other and the community. That remains risky and is only sustainable with practice and with maintaining the communal network that needs to be able to hold the occasional fall.

• **Open minds by disrupting the “traditional” while creating and integrating the unexpected.**

KCN Seniors Co-op has disrupted the traditional top-down service delivery model by having members take ownership of their needs and by co-creating and co-delivering the services they need to age well at home. The co-op already had to face and work through unforeseen challenges like bureaucratic obstacles and individual hesitations. Without doubt, KCN Seniors Co-op will have to spiral through recurring cycles of resistance and renewal.

• **Move, shake, and shape.**

KCN Seniors Co-op moves, shakes, and shapes the communities it is part of and connected with while at the same time being moved, shaken, and shaped by members, other stakeholders, and the communities and ecosystems surrounding the co-op.

• **Dance the dance of followership.**

Members of our cooperative find themselves moving back and forth between different roles (e.g., elected board members and voting members, committee lead and committee members,

event coordinators and event participants, etc.). As such, many continuously step in and out of the role of followership and leadership almost like in an improv dance. Many of us must learn and develop the courage to do so, over and over again.

• **Multi-level and multi-dimensional follower- and leadership.**

Cooperatives are connected across space (e.g., through their national and international association with each other and through direct cooperation between like-minded cooperatives across regional or even national boundaries) and across time (e.g., through the history and future developments of the cooperative movement both locally and globally). Members of KCN Seniors Co-op, play different and often changing roles within the different nodes and connections of these networks. For example, as cofounder of KCN Seniors Co-op I also am a member of and play different roles at different levels of other cooperative organizations in the region (e.g., investor in Killick Ecovillage Co-op’s development company, board member of Sunrise Funeral Co-op, delegate at the NL Federation of Cooperatives, member of Atlantic Edge Credit Union). Similarly, we are affected by—and in turn influence—the history and traditions of local and regional co-ops. We follow the lead of the international co-op alliance and help forge the regional, national, and international co-op identity.

• **Oscillating between various modes of participation.**

Depending on the governance roles we play within our cooperatives and cooperative networks, we quickly and constantly move back and forth between being in the lead (e.g., as board or even executive members, as committee chairs, or as coordinator or facilitator of initiatives or events) and following the lead of others. The democratic structure of our cooperatives, the one-member-one-vote principle, and the orientation towards decision-making by consent ensure that all voices are heard and that all members count equally. This back and forth can and will be exhausting at times. Only if all of us step in and out at times, as much as we can, is this model sustainable.

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In conclusion, the cooperative model and approaches as implemented in an existing co-op demonstrate many if not all



*KCN Seniors Co-op
Public Workshop,
April 28, 2024.*

Photos courtesy of Thomas Mengel



the skills, attitudes, and behaviours required by a communal and futures-oriented leadership model. Our values, principles, and processes constantly remind us—as we do remind each other—of the importance of challenging the status quo of the dominant leadership structures and decision-making processes. Continuing the cooperative path will help us consolidate and further develop the future as described in Restakis’ vision of a humanized economy with all of us as “fellow travellers on a common road to building a better society for all”¹⁴. Together, we can prioritize reciprocal relationships and relational services over profitable commodities, cooperative service delivery in local communities over market-driven solutions for the masses, and establish “social care...[as] shared outcome between care giver and care receiver”¹⁵. As a result, our “co-operatives expand democratic space”¹⁶, they help bring to bear the “profound joy of collective effort”¹⁷, and they “institutionalize reciprocity”¹⁸. As members of our cooperatives and of the ecosystems we are part of, we hold each other responsible for living up to our own values and principles, we support each other in our daily work of co-creating the future we want and the organizations we need, and we demonstrate empathy and solidarity in helping each other back up when we falter and fail. 🐦

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

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Cooperative Futures Imagined—From Earth to Mars and Back

By Thomas Mengel

Communal values and reciprocal community building play a large role in imaginative fiction about the future—and cooperatives are an important part of this. Kim Stanley Robinson is my go-to (science) fiction writer of choice¹. In addition to his fictional work, he continuously and critically comments on social and economic issues resulting from the crisis of capitalism. He does so from a social democratic perspective. In several of his writings he explores cooperative ways of organizing human endeavours. He lives in a cooperative and consent-oriented cohousing community in Davis, California, experiencing first-hand and contributing to an existing and promising alternative of communal living.

In his Mars trilogy, Robinson combines his best-known fiction novels. He follows the human trajectory by imagining how it might evolve towards a far-out human future away from earth². Written in 1992 and imagining what happens from 2026 onward, the first volume, *Red Mars*, describes how humans first will take their issues and current solutions with them: clashing worldviews and positions, dominance of transnational capitalist corporations, personal conflicts, and transnational wars. As a result, conflicts on Mars and interstellar wars continue even 100 years later into the second volume, *Green Mars*, written in 1993. Only the increasing crises and chaos on Earth allow the Martian settlers to break free, “resettle in political autonomy and with newfound hope for the future”³. In *Blue Mars* (written in 1996), set in the 2220s, settlers successfully complete the “transformation into transglobal harmony and security and towards spreading human civilization further through space and time”⁴. Both on Earth and on Mars, more democratic and cooperative organizations replace the traditional businesses. Collaborative, if not cooperative, governments and hybrid economic systems beyond the capitalism-socialism-divide begin to prevail both on Earth and on Mars (and beyond), resulting in the hope for a cooperative, secure, and harmonious future at the end of the trilogy.

Writing at almost the same time as Robinson, Octavia E. Butler⁵ never finished her Parable (Earthseed) series. After publishing *The Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *The Parable of the Talents* (1998), Butler experienced writer’s block, suffered from depression, and switched to exploring other themes in her writing⁶.

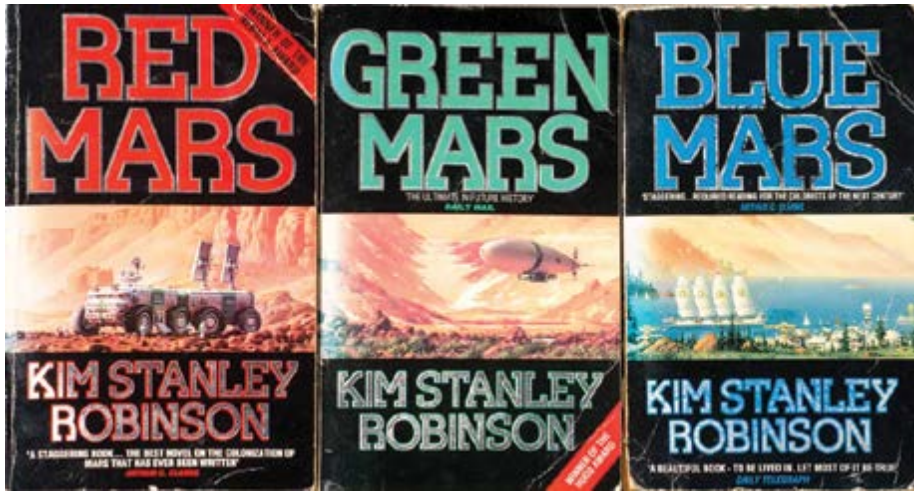
The Parable of the Sower imagines a dystopian California in the 2020s and 2030s, where a teenaged protagonist, Olamina (Lauren), survives the gang-related violence and creates a new belief system—Earthseed—based on the inevitability of change, on god as change, and on change as god. Olamina, like Earthseed, also envisions a future of humans on another

Without a significant paradigm shift towards communal values and cooperative practices, we will likely fail.



Trapeze artists fly through the air, holding on to trust.

Strobridge Litho. Co., Cincinnati & New York, via
faithandleadership.com/nathan-kirkpatrick-trapeze-artists-fly-
through-the-air-holding-trust.



planet. Together with some fellow travellers, Olamina relocates to a new community in Northern California called Acorn. The sequel, *The Parable of the Talents*, is set after Olamina's death some 30 years later. It describes "the invasion of Acorn by right-wing fundamentalist Christians, Olamina's attempts to survive their religious 're-education', and the final triumph of Earthseed as a community and a doctrine"⁷, with the first interstellar Earthseed colonists taking off for a new destiny, decades after the dire beginnings. "Only the name of the spaceship gives us pause: against Olamina's wishes the ship has been named the *Christopher Columbus*, suggesting that perhaps the Earthseeders aren't escaping the nightmare of history at all, but bringing it with them instead"⁸.

When working on *The Parable of the Trickster*⁹, Butler felt it was too hard to push through with her third book out of seven as envisioned for this series. She died of a stroke in 2006 without ever having finished the Parable series. However, from interviews and notes we know what she imagined for the future of communities based on the Earthseed beliefs.

The Earthseed colony of the future at first was not what the founder had hoped for, given the colonists had indeed brought their earthly issues with them. Butler herself noted that "what they're going to have to deal with is themselves. There's no going home. Nobody will follow within their lifetimes.... The real problem is dealing with themselves, surviving their promised land"¹⁰. Butler had also imagined a society of individuals with "hyperempathy" for each other (like Olamina and some of her fellow travellers, perceiving and feeling the pain of others as their own). Instead, and based on the realities she experienced in the mid to late '90s, darkness, misery, and homesickness appear to prevail in this middle of the seven-part series. "Four more books. That would be how long it would take, in Butler's estimation, for the human beings of the future to move past their homesickness, their biology, and their history and truly become capable of working towards a common decency. She saw hope, but only a long way off"¹¹.

"What the all-important dream of the Destiny offered Olamina, offered Butler—offers us—was a chance not to *abolish* human nature but to perhaps temporarily suspend it; the extrasolar colonies are the chance to start over in circumstances whose radical hardship would offer a chance to build new practices of solidarity and collective life rather than indulge the selfish impulses the bad habits of capitalism and the bad instructions in our DNA have ingrained in us....they can choose: either live together, work together, struggle together, and pray together, or else hoard food alone, scheme alone, lose their minds alone, breakdown and die and murder each other alone. And the tragedy is she was never able, in her short life, to think through the hopeful part"¹².

Back to Earth and to our own not-so-distant future, Robinson did just that. Published in 2020, his book *Ministry for the Future*¹³ begins in 2025 and paints a glimpse of hope into the picture he sees emerging from the disasters ahead. Written as climate fiction and based on hard facts, the main plot follows Mary Murphy, the head of the fictitious Ministry for the Future established as result of the 2015 Paris Agreement for climate

change, and Frank May, the American aid worker who has been traumatized by the catastrophic heat wave in India at the beginning of the novel. Ecology, economics, and events unfolding in the near future create the dynamic background of the novel and for the various human and organizational responses.

Throughout the novel, Robinson explores the role various cooperative endeavours could play in collaboratively addressing the issues resulting from climate change and the failures of competitive capitalism.

"It wasn't going to happen from the top. The lawmakers were corrupt. So, if not top-down, then bottom-up. Like a whirlwind, as some put it. Whirlwinds rose from the ground—although conditions aloft enabled that to happen. People, the multitude. Young people? Not just congregating to demonstrate, but changing all their behaviors? Living together in tiny houses, working at green jobs in cooperative ventures, with never the chance of a big financial windfall somehow dropping on them like a lottery win?"¹⁴

Cooperative financial institutions like credit unions, employee-owned worker cooperatives, agricultural land cooperatives, and (co-)housing cooperatives are being discussed by various individual and organizational actors in the novel. The conversations don't shy away from the challenges that need to be overcome for the cooperatives to succeed and to be sustainable. Thriving examples like the Basque worker cooperatives of Mondragón¹⁵ and the greater cooperative movement are discussed as hopeful alternatives enacting the cooperative principles of "open admission, democratic organization, the sovereignty of labor, the instrumental and subordinate nature of capital, participatory management, payment solidarity, inter-cooperation, social transformation, universality, and education"¹⁶. Towards the end of the novel, Mary and Frank independently find their home in different housing cooperatives, despite the challenges—and are ready to take them on.

Several lessons learned emerge from the writings of Robinson and Butler that serve as guidelines and encouragement when imagining and co-creating a cooperative future:

• To the extent we humans and our societies continue the path of competitive capitalism without a significant paradigm shift towards communal values and cooperative practices, we will likely fail or at least face a long and hard road ahead.

• Escaping Earth on our way out into space—which given the scientific projections about Earth heating up to a degree of becoming uninhabitable in a couple of billions of years may indeed be the only way for humankind to survive in the very long run—will at first not help our species escape from the issues we experience on Earth. Human settlements in outer space will still have to work hard on community development and on overcoming the legacy of competitive capitalism, worldview clashes, and the resulting violence and warfare.

• Survival of and hope for our species and for our societies in the long run may depend on our ability to adapt and to flexibly co-create values systems very similar to the current cooperative values and principles: self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity¹⁷.

• Existing cooperative communities suggest that a better cooperative future is indeed possible one step at a time. However, we will have to collaborate more—across national, organizational, and institutional boundaries—to overcome additional challenges, catastrophes, and the resulting chaos in the near future. Together we can and must do our best to help the cooperative future grow and to make it sustainable. 🌸

Thomas Mengel is a leadership scholar and practitioner, adult educator, social entrepreneur, writer, historian, futurist, and computer scientist. (For a longer bio, see page 34.) He has written about Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy earlier and in more detail here: Mengel, T. (2021). From Earth to Mars and back—Exploring leadership perspectives for the future. In: Mengel, T. (2021; ed.). Leadership for the Future: Lessons from the Past, Current Approaches, and Future Insights. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. www.cambridgescholars.com/product/978-1-5275-7059-7, pp. 192-216.

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Diana Leaf Christian

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The View from 2060

By Daniel Greenberg



Back in the mid-'20s, humanity was like a caterpillar dissolving in our cocoon, unaware of what was to come. When climate chaos whacked us upside our head in '26 and it became clear that AI was coming for *all* our jobs, the masses started to wake up. Dark horse candidates were elected in '28 on utopian platforms: ending fossil fuels by 2040, money out of politics, renewable energy everywhere, and an AI tax to provide for everyone's basic needs: food, shelter, medical care, transportation, education...

But that was only the beginning! We thought our goal was to heal the planet, but really it was always to heal ourselves. As we shed our capitalist mindsets of scarcity, exploitation, and separation—when we increasingly didn't *have* to do anything—we started to remember our oneness and follow our deeper longings. Music, art, and poetry flowed like waterfalls through busted dams; billions joyfully planted gardens, forests, regenerated entire ecosystems. We created virtual worlds where, together, we could learn and grow, we could build our Mount Olympus, we could rise in love.

And that was the real kicker. You see, we thought love was about close family or finding someone “until death do us part,” a faithful spouse, a hot lover, a best friend, even a soulmate. Sure, but healing the planet and our individual, collective, and ancestral traumas actually required us to consciously evolve. As we created a more meaningful world where we could feel safe, sig-

nificant, and free, our inner eyes opened and we began to really see each other as “spiritual beings having human experiences.”

And *that* widened our circle of love beyond our partners, friends, and family, to include those who see the world differently...other species...the oceans and rainforests...the entire planet... Now, in 2060, I feel the inklings of an emerging planetary consciousness. I feel Gaia awakening.

Even back then, I was lucky to have opportunities to help create our caterpillar's imaginal cells—intentional communities and ecovillages building local food and energy systems; inclusive forms of governance; and most importantly, new stories of how we can live well and lightly together. I *knew* emerging from our chrysalis was not only possible, it was inevitable. How could I have been so sure? Because everywhere I looked, I saw human butterflies, their wet wings drying in the sun. 🦋

Daniel Greenberg is Co-Director of the Foundation for Intentional Community (FIC); former Education Director, Findhorn Foundation; former Board President of GEN International; Founder/Director of Earth Deeds nonprofit and the former educational nonprofit Living Routes Study Abroad in Ecovillages. Daniel has lived at the Findhorn Community in Scotland, Auroville in India, and Sirius Community in Massachusetts, and has visited and worked in well over 100 ecovillages around the world. You can also watch the digital version of this story at gen-us.net/2060.

A Vision of Simplicity

By Riana Good

More is never enough. —Unknown

When did you last spend at least 24 hours without coming into contact with a machine? It's been a while for me. This year I have started a commitment to keep the Sabbath and abstain from engaging in work, machines, and money for 24+ hours each week, and yet I don't recall when I last went without using a machine for more than three days, or without hearing a machine for more than 10 hours. I am grateful for their presence—and also for their absence.

Our off-grid permaculture community is in a relatively quiet, rural area of Hawaii Island, and machines are central to our lives. We rely on mowers, weed whackers, chainsaws, trucks, cars, and solar power. We regularly use our Instapots, Vitamix, breadmaker, ice cream maker, and food dehydrator. We benefit from and have benefited from airplanes, bulldozers, cement mixers. We use phones and computers less often than most,

but screens are essentially an expectation for communicating. Even when we are not using machines, we regularly hear sounds from the road, from neighboring sound systems, from planes and helicopters.

I love my life and I love our community. I enjoy what machines can help us to do and make and experience. And, I envision a community where machine-use is rare, where we explore how little we can do, where we celebrate existence as it is.

• • •

I love soundscapes. I love listening to rain and waves and breeze—breeze through banana leaves with a light slap-fwap, breeze through coconut fronds with a flicking patter, breeze through grass with a swish-sigh. Any day witnessing sun-



Riana Good

rise and sunset with the natural sounds of the earth is a good day. Acute hearing is a blessing of pleasure, and also a challenge. I happen to be particularly sensitive to machine-generated noise, especially when I am in a restful state. To be meditating and then hear the whir of a distant motor tugs at my attention, and my body often contracts in frustration. If I'm the one using the machine, it's easier to endure because the motor cortex and auditory cortex can calibrate and because I have more of a say in when it's making noise. Agreeing as a group to use machines for just two or three days a week would give us both more work time together *and* more rest and leisure time together.

It probably comes as no surprise that dozens of studies worldwide conclude that quiet is calming, whereas commotion generates stress. It is no wonder that the word "noise" is derived from the Latin word *nausea*. Our bodies are designed to react to environmental noise, and we literally can't ignore it. Sound waves vibrate the bones within the ear, and the physical vibrations are converted to electrical signals that fire into the auditory cortex of the brain. At lower frequencies, our entire body becomes a sound receptor. The body responds immediately, even during sleep. Perhaps you have noticed that people living among noise experience elevated levels of stress hormones, which is often linked to increased blood pressure, heart disease, and cellular damage. Phew!

By returning to the more hushed natural surroundings in which our bodies evolved, we find more relaxation. Our version of quiet can calibrate to our lives and communities. How might it feel to turn off the fridge during meals—or keep it on a timer or remote control? What would we gain from one or two or three phone-free hours each day? What if we viewed silence and simplicity as the norm?

• • •

When nothing is done, nothing is left undone.
—Tao Te Ching

What is the simplest path, the least we can do? The fewest meetings, the least maintenance, the most simplicity? What *don't* we need, what are we willing—and even eager—to do without?

Where do we choose simplicity and ancestral skills over "con-

venience"? In what ways do machines create more complexity?

Envisioning a Community of Simplicity, we prioritize communicating in-person, learning by direct experience, and attentiveness over entertainment. We primarily walk and bike to get around, though we can benefit from vehicles on designated "machine days"—or use the vehicles parked outside the bounds of the community. We use fire or propane to heat our food. We use knives and grinders to chop and blend. We use candles and moonlight—augmented by some solar-powered red lights that are easy on the eyes and circadian rhythms. Without snowstorms or heatwaves, we don't need snowplows or fans. The less we do, the more attention and presence we have.

We let the natural cycles guide us. Early morning and evening are quieter, while daytime is more active. Babyhood and old age are quieter, while youth and adulthood are more active. The dark new moon is quieter, while the bright full moon is more active. Seasonal and other cycles also inform our flow. We follow daily, weekly, lunar, annual, and life cycles, and balance our work~leisure~rest accordingly. [See image for a visual representation.]

We find pleasure in exploring a work~leisure~rest balance that feels good to us as individuals and as a community. We are in integrity with our own choices, and choose simplicity out of joy rather than guilt or compliance. We adhere to a weekly 24+ hours of Sabbath rest, and otherwise modulate our work~leisure~rest ratios based on our age, role, preferences, and the natural cycles.

How do you feel, envisioning this? Are you excited? Incredulous? Resistant? Does this even seem possible in the developed world in the year 2025? Let us be inspired by villages that are still able to practice their ancestral ways, some Mennonite and Amish communities, and various centers of religious practice. Still, we grapple with questions such as: Are simplicity and convenience at odds? Does choosing quietude amidst a more active society create isolation? How can we train ourselves to prioritize the present moment? Is how we spend our days how we spend our lives? 🙏

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, #203, #204, and #205.

Work~Leisure~Rest

Each of us may group work, leisure, and rest differently. For me, rest is stillness, non-doing, quietude, meditation, and prayer. While reading may feel restful, it still activates the language and hearing centers of the cerebral cortex of the brain. Choosing silence, we activate the deeper and more ancient structures of the subcortical zones of the brain.

Relaxation—as distinct from rest—is the overall feeling that comes with a balance of rest, work, and leisure. What do you consider to be work? Leisure? Rest? What about others in your family, household, and community?

—RG

1. Machine: an apparatus using or applying mechanical power and having several parts, each with a definite function and together performing a particular task. —*Oxford Dictionary*.

Spiral Dynamics— Which Reality Do We Live in?

By Diana Leafé Christian



Natalia Gasiorowska

What is the Spiral Dynamics¹ model and what does it have to do with community? This proposed model of cultures and human consciousness attempts to explain the values, motives, and beliefs that characterize different worldviews observable in various cultures in history, and that also manifest in stages of human development within individual people.

Our worldview derives from bits of information in our environment—our family, friends, and culture—which coalesce to form our overarching sense of what we find valuable and thus what ideas we allow into our minds. Worldviews can be compared to magnets, attracting bits of information in alignment with our existing sense of reality and repelling the bits that don't resonate with it. Once people and whole societies have solidified a worldview, it becomes part of their identity and thus very difficult to change. Individuals and whole societies will go to great lengths to protect themselves from being affected by other worldviews.

Developmental psychologist Clare Graves, who introduced the Spiral Dynamics model, identified at least eight observable widely differing worldviews or stages of development operating in different cultures and within different individuals. Later Spiral Dynamics researchers Don Beck and Christopher Cowan depicted these stages visually as turns on a spiral, with each turn on the spiral represented by a different color (but only in order to help people easily distinguish between stages). Each stage is believed to emerge out of the previous stage in reaction against that stage's excesses. However, each stage also includes the most useful parts of the previous stage, adding more consciousness, awareness, and nuance to them.

Spiral Dynamics experts don't believe any one stage is inherently positive or negative or somehow better than any other stage. Rather, they believe each stage is a reasonable response of a culture, or of an individual person, to the specific conditions of the local environment, including its social circumstances, dangers, and opportunities.

I believe we in the intentional communities world can benefit from this model to better understand ourselves and our fellow community members. This is especially true in helping us understand why some community members may want to directly address and resolve community conflict triggered by members exhibiting what I call

“especially challenging behaviors,”² and why other members don't.

The Stages

Red Stage: The Red stage in Spiral Dynamics, for example, is the third of the first six stages after what Graves and others identified as the first pure survival (Beige) stage, and the second animistic, tribal (Purple) stage. The Red Stage is described as warlike and violent, with a “might makes right” ethic. Examples of people and groups operating primarily from Red include warlords in less-developed countries, traditional enemies in tribal cultures, organized crime, inner city gangs, and some of prison culture.

Blue Stage: When people operating mostly from the Red stage grow exhausted with its violence and self-centeredness they can emerge into the Blue stage, ideally retaining the energy and drive of Red but abandoning its violent, chaotic aspects. Blue offers relative safety, order, stability, and certainty—a welcome respite from Red. It's characterized by absolute truths, deference to authority figures and their absolute truths, and hierarchical organizations. Examples include the Roman Army, the Catholic



People operating mostly from Green value nature and the environment, harmony, idealism, inclusiveness, empathy, and consensus.

Church, Fundamentalist religions, and public school hierarchies.

Orange Stage: When people operating mostly from the Blue stage grow weary of its conformity, they can emerge into the Orange stage, ideally retaining the order and stability of Blue but letting go of its rigidity and absolutism. The Orange stage is characterized by individual achievement, material success, a requirement for replicable evidence, and often lack of empathy, rather than by faith based in personal religious revelation or the edicts of religious authorities. Orange is characterized by the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment, industrialization, conspicuous consumption, and corporate culture. Examples of people and cultures operating primarily from Orange include scientists and the scientific method, most IT professionals, Elon Musk, Wall Street, the movie character Gordon Gekko, the United States, and most countries in Western Europe.

Green Stage: When people realize that scientific and technological advancements and material success don't necessarily yield happiness, they can move into the Green stage, ideally retaining the organizational ability and need for evidence, but letting go of Orange materialism and lack of empathy. Green is characterized by inclusiveness, empathetic connection with others, social consciousness, pluralism, emotionally authentic relating, and relative truth rather than absolute truth. Green is exemplified by the social sciences, academia, nonprofits, environmentalists, social justice activists, the Transition Movement, Nonviolent Communication, non-hierarchical organizational structures, and egalitarian decision-making.

In each of the stages above people usually feel *certain* that the way they see reality is the one true Truth, and therefore can perceive anyone who appears to value different things or operate in a different reality as just plain wrong, ignorant, deluded, stupid, or even dangerous. For example, while people who operate mainly in the Green stage value diversity and tolerance, they may also be so convinced they're right and that others need to think, feel, and believe as they do that, paradoxically, many Green folks can also be intolerant of people operating from other stages or worldviews.

Spiral Dynamics Nuances

Spiral Dynamics scholars insist that Blue is not "better" than Red, and Orange is not "better" than Blue, just as a sixth grader is not "better" than they were when they were in the first grade. Rather, the sixth grader had to first experience and build on what they learned in the first grade before they could move through all the subsequent grades to finally arrive in the sixth grade.

In fact, Graves gave an ethical warning when describing Spiral Dynamics, insisting that people and societies have a right to be just as they are. Instead of looking down on or trying to change people with a worldview or stage different than ours, we should use our knowledge of these worldviews, these stages, to better understand and interact

with them. This is especially important in community.

Moreover, a culture or civilization may be characterized primarily by one stage, but that culture and its individuals can exhibit attitudes and behaviors of different stages at different times, depending on people's circumstances and what's necessary for their survival or comfort. In this way, as cultures and individuals grow and change and become more aware with new insights and new experiences, cultures and individuals may gradually shift into the next developmental stage on the spiral.

Furthermore, while we as individuals can operate primarily from one stage, we can also exhibit the attitudes and behaviors of adjacent stages, depending on our circumstances. Additionally, the different stages don't occur sequentially in history like the rungs of a ladder, nor are cultures and individuals solely characterized by just one stage. Rather, while each stage emerged in various civilizations and cultures at different times in human history, each stage continues to exist. All of the eight identified stages exist right now in the world.

The First Six Stages—Scarcity and Survival

Spiral Dynamic scholars describe the first six worldview turns on the spiral, including Green, as coming mostly from survival and scarcity. They see the scarcity issue of the Red stage as lack of power; of the Blue stage, lack of safety; of the Orange stage, lack of success; and of the Green stage, lack of harmony. As noted earlier, in the Spiral Dynamics model,

people in each of these stages believe their reality is the only legitimate reality. So each stage is characterized by an “us vs. them” mentality, with people feeling frightened, baffled, or repelled, and convinced that those other people are wrong-headed, don’t know how to live properly, and may be dangerous too. In the Red stage, the alien others must be annihilated; in the Blue stage they must be corrected or punished; in the Orange stage they must be dismissed and disdained. And in the Green stage—which I believe often predominates in intentional communities—those “less spiritual” others must be or converted and re-educated.

We communitarians who come primarily from Green tend to assume we’re more conscious, more environmentally aware, and more spiritually evolved than those poor sods operating mostly from the fundamentalist, authoritarian Blue stage, or the materialistic, soulless Orange stage. We fortunate souls who’ve “evolved” to and operate mostly from the Green stage can believe we know what’s best for everyone—love, kindness, compassion, equality, consensus, emotional vulnerability, spirituality, ecology, community—and, ironically, may feel superior to others because of it.

Let’s say for the sake of discussion that most of a community’s members seem to operate most of the time from sharing, caring, consensual Green. But some community members—usually not many in any group—seem to come (perhaps only sometimes) from the next stage—Yellow. And *that* can be a problem.

Yellow—Strange and New

People operating mostly from the **Yellow Stage** value experience, competence, understanding, open-mindedness, creativity, clear thinking, Big-Picture overviews, considering and synthesizing diverse ideas, wisdom, self-actualization. They are comfortable with paradox and ambiguity and are able to consider diverse and contradictory ideas fairly impartially. They have a deep sense of purpose, are open to new experiences, and love learning and integrating new ideas. They don’t value feeling over thinking as in the Green stage, or thinking over feeling like the Orange stage; Yellow stage people value *both* feeling *and* thinking. This stage is characterized by quantum mechanics, systems thinking, flow states, Chaos Theory, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, Permaculture Design, Nonviolent Communication, the Sociocracy and Holacracy self-governance methods, the Prosocial Movement, Ken Wilber’s Integral Theory, and the Spiral Dynamics model. Phrases exemplifying Yellow include “Wisdom is knowing what we don’t know” and “We can’t solve our problems at the same level of thinking that created the problem.”

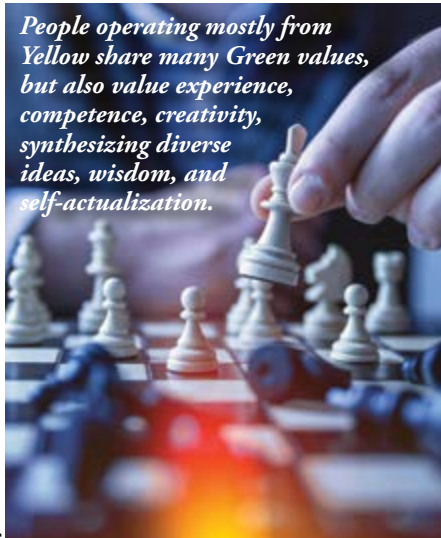
Green and Yellow—the Widest Gulf

According to Spiral Dynamics scholars and advocates, the greatest, most Grand Canyon-like gulf is between the Green and Yellow stages. The first six stages on the spiral, including Green, are considered “First Tier” stages, and Yellow is the first of what they see as “Second Tier” stages. They estimate only one percent of humanity is in the Yellow stage (though philosopher Ken Wilber estimates it’s five percent). Clare Graves called Yellow and its subsequent Second Tier stages “a quantum leap in one’s awareness of reality.” Thus people who operate mainly from Yellow are believed to no longer come from survival and scarcity. They can understand and appreciate other views of reality and the values and motives of people in other stages; they don’t consider the attitudes or behaviors of other stages as bad, wrong, or inferior. People operating mostly from Yellow are thought to not only realize that different, necessary developmental stages exist—like parallel realities—they also *don’t* feel a desperate need to convince others to perceive and think and believe as they do.

People operating mostly from the Yellow stage of course *also* desire harmony, community, egalitarian self-governance, and wanting the world to be a better place, just as people operating mostly from Green do. However, Yellow *also* asks, “How do we manifest these ideals in ways that actually *work*?” The Yellow stage is *practical*.

As you can see, Yellow is immensely different from Green. And while Green is considered “tolerant” in comparison with other First Tier stages, and Yellow is believed to be innately tolerant and aware that all other stages are valid and appropriate for various people’s life conditions, Green and Yellow inevitably disagree about strategies to

People operating mostly from Yellow share many Green values, but also value experience, competence, creativity, synthesizing diverse ideas, wisdom, and self-actualization.



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Cass Holmes



Spiral Dynamics scholars believe the greatest difference between any two stages is between Green and Yellow.

Gabriel Garcia Marengo



achieve goals or solve problems. Thus they can become impatient and annoyed with each other. (When this happens perhaps those in Yellow are relatively new to and not yet firmly established in the Yellow stage, and so revert to Green when frustrated.)

People operating mostly in Yellow can often see Green colleagues as intolerant of or even arrogant towards people who don't share their New Age, holistic views. They can see their mostly-Green colleagues as limited, narrow-minded, "More ecological than thou," or "More spiritual than thou." Yellow can see Green as frustrating and slow, especially in what seems to Yellow like Green's indulgence in long, fruitless meetings with emotionally rich sharing, and taking an inordinate amount of time (by Yellow's standards) to get to the point or to actually resolve an issue. People mostly in Yellow stage can perceive people operating mostly in Green as fuzzy thinkers who seem too compassionate and too emotional *to actually solve the problem*. Yellow can see Green as tending to have difficulty with money, often not managing their projects well, and frequently stymied by what is sometimes called "toxic egalitarianism."

In turn, people operating mostly from Green can experience those operating mostly from Yellow as cold and unfeeling, and focused more on results than on emotionally rich relating. Green can see Yellow as not being as devoted to emotional authenticity, to meetings focused on feelings, or showing enough empathy for people struggling with emotional distress and dysfunction as they should be. Their sentiments toward people in Yellow may be: "What's the *matter* with you? Why don't you have more compassion? Where's your *heart*?"

Some members of my community speculated that a Green-Yellow clash triggered our former "Agriculture Wars," in which two different groups of members saw the purpose and functioning of potential onsite agricultural projects in completely different ways. Some seemed to embody Green values and others Yellow values.

Green and Yellow and "Especially Challenging Behaviors"

Let's say a community has one or more members who appear to frequently exhibit what I call especially challenging behaviors.² These include behaviors like being overbearing; having an apparent attitude of self-centeredness, entitlement, and superiority; displaying little to no empathy for others; and seeing themselves as unfairly victimized by those who try to offer feedback and requests for changed behaviors and attitudes, or who don't agree with them. People who consistently and frequently exhibit these behaviors (which mental health professionals call "narcissism") don't respond

to the usual methods of dealing with interpersonal conflict in community; they don't respond to empathy and Nonviolent Communication, "heartshares" and "talking stick circles," or mediation and conflict resolution methods. They seem to respond only to limits and boundaries being placed on their behaviors, either at the individual level—of one community member to another—or at the whole-community level, with the community itself setting limits and boundaries, such as asking someone who often disrupts meetings with these behaviors to stop attending community business meetings for a period of time.

What do especially challenging behaviors have to do with people operating mostly from the Green and Yellow stages? In my experience, when one or more community members exhibit these behaviors in a way that disrupts group harmony and people's feelings of emotional safety, a few community members (who I think operate at least some of the time from Yellow) *want their group to identify, name, and directly address these behaviors* by setting clear limits and boundaries on the behaviors.

However, *most* community members (whom I suspect may be operating mostly from Green) may not want the group to set limits and boundaries on these behaviors, believing that doing this would hurt the community. That is, given the emphasis of Green on harmony, cooperation, and emotionally rich relating, and relative rather than absolute truth, they see identifying, naming, and directly addressing hurtful behaviors by setting limits and boundaries as *itself* creating conflict. Sometimes this is described as having "conflict-averse" attitudes and behaviors, or as people taking the "Rescuer" role in the Karpman Drama Triangle model.

If you've read the challenging behaviors article series,² consider the following examples cited in the series from real communities that attempted to deal (or not deal) with these behaviors:

- The probable Yellow strategy some communities use to set limits and boundaries on these behaviors, including using Connection Contracts, and defend and reiterate these boundaries when they're challenged.

- The probable Yellow policy at Heart-Culture Farm Community in its five-step process of dealing with especially challenging behaviors.

- The seemingly Yellow idea in my community—stopped by apparently Green members—to create a Consensus Mentor for better meeting behavior or organize petitions and alliances to ask the community to take action on these behaviors.

- The likely Green responses of communities that did not deal with disruptive, hurtful behaviors like those of Eldred when he targeted Joseph (third article), Hugo when he drove away desirable new members (fourth article), and Stacey when she stopped the Consensus Mentor idea (eighth article).

- The likely Green response of those in Umberto's community (fourth article) who created a mutual support group to support each other with Nonviolent Communication and empathy, and to create silent, nonviolent responses to disruptive behaviors in meetings.

- The apparently Yellow response of community members who wanted to create more emotional safety in their community by organizing a future community meeting to give feedback to and request change from one of their members, Mavis, with especially challenging behaviors.

- And the apparently Green response of another member of that community, Ian, who tried to prevent the group from doing this, fearing that giving Mavis feedback and asking for change would hurt her feelings.

Community members operating mostly from Yellow can learn to communicate more effectively with friends and colleagues who seem to operate mostly from Green by appealing to their core Green values, which of course *these Yellow members also share*. People operating in Yellow can try to help those mostly coming from Green see that sometimes step-by-step, practical methods to reduce conflict and create clear agreements—including setting limits and boundaries when necessary—can help the group ultimately generate *more* harmony, trust, and connection. This is what I do in my classes on conflict in community—emphasizing the real-life practical steps various communities have actually done that have

Recommended Spiral Dynamics Resources

Books:

- *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership, and Change* by Don Edward Beck and Christopher C. Cowan, Blackwell Publishing, 1996.

Videos, Video Series:

- Leo Gura's video (actualized.org): *The Grand Model Of Psychological Evolution—Clare Graves & Spiral Dynamics*
- Max Saris' video: *Spiral Dynamics Simplified—What is Spiral Dynamics?*
- 23-minute video: *Spiral Dynamics: The Ultimate Theory of Human Development*

Websites:

- *Spiral Dynamics Integral Nederland*: spiral-dynamics-integral.nl/en
- *David Smart—Thinking with David*: thinkingwithdavid.com (See post: *Spiral Dynamics: Memes, Worldviews & the Information Age*: thinkingwithdavid.com/spiral-dynamics)

—DLC

curbed and contained especially challenging behaviors.

I believe those of us who want to deal more effectively with conflict and challenging behaviors in our communities can benefit by learning about the Spiral Dynamics model and considering how it may or may not apply in our own community. (See “Recommended Spiral Dynamics Resources,” above.) 🍷

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

1. Spiral Dynamics was developed by developmental psychologist Clare Graves and promoted and developed further by social psychologist Don Beck and neuroscientist Christopher Cowan. Its concepts were later included in spiritual/New Age philosopher Ken Wilber's Integral Theory model.

2. See article series, “Working Effectively with Especially Challenging Behaviors,” in COMMUNITIES, Winter 2021 through Summer 2024 issues (#193, #194, #196, #197, #198, #200, #201, #203).



Joshua Hoehne

COMMUNITY AS A SUPER-ORGANISM: Boundary Circles in Response to Persistent Difficult Behavior

By Kara Huntermoon

I am not saying, “the difficult person is bad and needs to leave.” Rather, I believe “the community doesn’t have the resources to address these difficulties. We need to be realistic about what we can handle right now and protect what is working.”

“I can’t do this any more! We have to evict Jude!” I pleaded with my community co-owners in a private meeting.

Six of us sat on couches and easy chairs around a low table: four resident co-owners, and two residents with month-to-month rental contracts. The two renters had each lived in our community for more than five years. Regardless of their legal/financial status, they frequently engaged in “owner-like” behaviors. (See sidebar). This earned them an invitation to many private “owners” meetings.

Jude, who was not invited, was the topic of many such private conversations. They usually went like this:

“I can’t live with Jude any more!” says Person A.

“But his wife and children!” responds Person B.

“I know, but Jude is scary and threatening and exhibits persistent difficult behaviors,” says Person C.

“He hasn’t changed, even after many interventions and mediations,” agrees Person B.

“But his wife and children!” responds Person A.

Did you catch that? Person A both “can’t live with Jude,” and also wants to keep the family in the community because of the wife and children. We all felt this way. We all, at one point or another, asked the owners group to support eviction, only to repeat this conversation again and again.

Throughout the nine years that this family lived with us, Jude usually worked a full-time job. This limited our need to cope with his behaviors. Meanwhile, his wife, Antonia, worked as a stay-at-home mom. The youngest of their kids was even born (unassisted!) in the communal bathhouse. We had good relationships with mom and children, and serious concerns about not allowing them to get too isolated. Antonia seemed very unlikely to leave Jude, and we knew she and the children were not exempt from being targeted by Jude’s difficult behaviors. So we went round and round on evicting Jude, and continued coping with him.

About a year before I became Person A, however, Jude and Antonia switched places. The children were older now, they explained, and Antonia missed working outside the home. With Jude as a full-time dad, his difficult behaviors ramped up.

He now attended every resident meeting. After meetings, he ranted and railed that we were going forward with decisions that he had never agreed to—even though he put his thumb up with everyone else during the consensus process. He repeatedly called the female co-owners contemptuous names like “Queen Kara,” and claimed that nobody in the community had a real vote because “the bitches” were the ones in charge. (His behavior towards the male co-owners was characterized by fawning and avoidance.)

The long-term residents had enough context for this behavior that we coped with it remarkably well. But the shorter-term residents became confused. Someone who had lived here for almost a decade must have some inside information. Perhaps the female co-owners couldn’t be trusted? Some of them began interpreting our behavior

in a consistently negative light. As this destructive influence lingered after Jude's family left the community, we came to call this "Jude's legacy."

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The issue that prompted this private owners meeting revolved around weapons. Since Jude now stayed home full-time to parent, he had begun teaching his children to throw knives. He hand-crafted leather armor with metal spikes in it for his 10-year-old son. We began finding toy guns, maces, blades, and whips in our shared outdoor spaces. These "toys" often looked and worked like the real thing. Worse, the children used them without adequate supervision. Children often have free rein on our small farm property—but not with weapons in hand.

When confronted, Jude claimed this was his "hobby," and we couldn't stop him because we didn't have any community policy against toy weapons. (A new policy would require Jude's consent.) Several residents felt that the combination of Jude's persistent difficult behaviors and his near-constant use of weapons in public spaces constituted an implied threat. For example, while in an acute conflict with another renter, Jude got out his bullwhip and "practiced" with it immediately outside the other resident's windows.

"Okay, so you can't live with Jude anymore. What about Antonia and the children?" asked my co-owner.

"We all agree that his behavior is unacceptable. In the past, he has temporarily controlled himself after we set strong boundaries," added another co-owner.

"But there's always a backlash, and it's often aimed at me," I protested. "I can't take it any more."

"It's often aimed at you because you are the one communicating the community's boundaries," said Samantha, one of the renters at the meeting. "What if you stopped doing that job and allowed me to do it instead?"

"I'm not sure how that would work," I replied.

"You focus on your self-care and healing in order to manage your reaction to

Jude. Tell me whenever you have an issue with his behavior. I will set boundaries with him. I'll also make an effort to get closer to him so he knows these boundaries are being communicated by someone who cares about him."

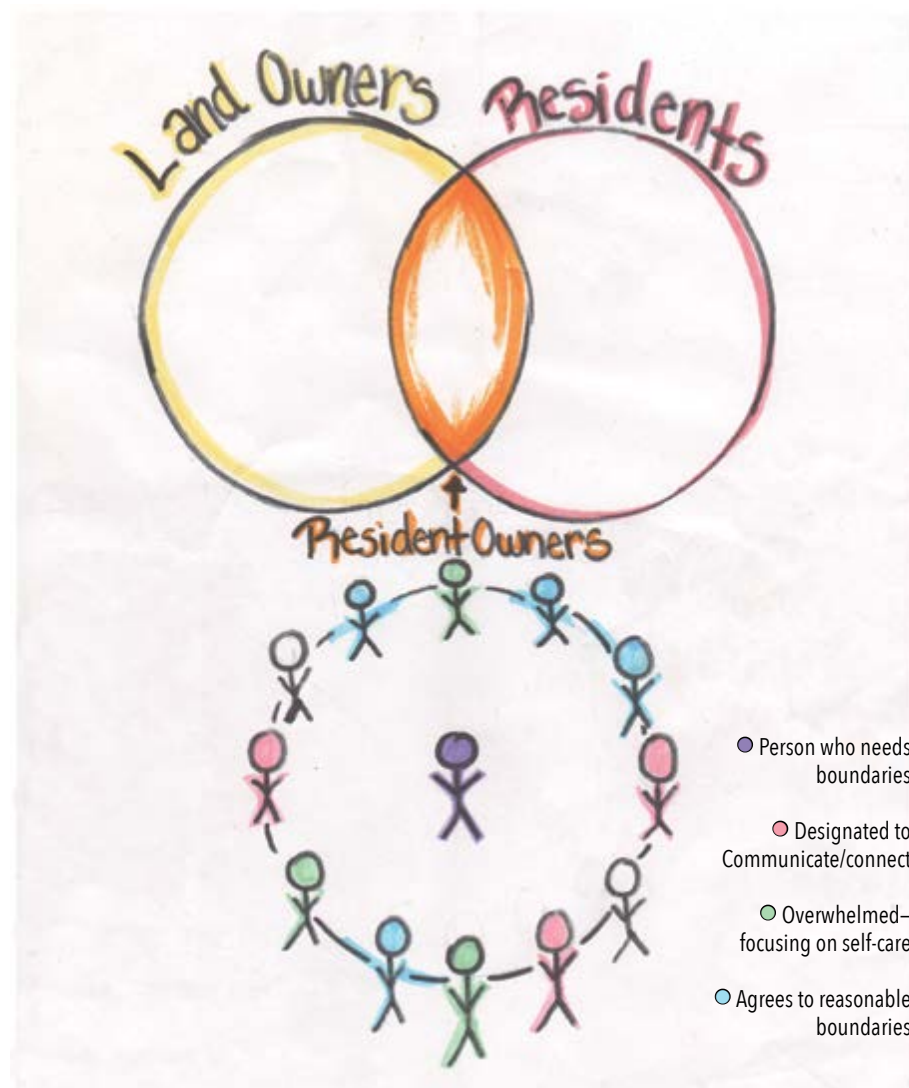
"That works for me, but what about other people?" I asked. "If others have an issue with Jude's behavior, will you field their concerns as well?"

Samantha agreed to be our designated communication person. This worked well for about six months. Then Jude started targeting her directly. Perhaps he felt threatened by her efforts to get closer to him.

Samantha called a private owners meeting in which she admitted that she had exhausted her emotional resources. She needed to retire from being Jude's "point person." Nobody else was willing to step into the role, so we agreed to evict. Two years later, some of our owners are still on friendly terms with Antonia and the children.

What made this strategy work:

1. The response team had unanimous agreement that Jude's behavior was unacceptable in our community. We trusted each other.
2. The people who had run out of personal/emotional resources to deal with this were invited to step back and focus on self-care and personal growth.
3. The people who had "juice" for it took greater responsibility by accepting a designation as "communications person."
4. When everyone ran out of "juice" and we exhausted our community resources, an exit strategy was employed. (We knew at the beginning of this process that "Plan B" was an exit strategy.)



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Since then we have been able to do this as a repeat strategy:

1. One co-owner or long-term resident says, “I can’t do this, I need out!” This causes us to call a meeting on the topic, without the “difficult” person present.

2. We go around the circle and everyone has a chance to express where they personally feel they are in terms of their resources to “do this.” We also check in about whether we agree that the other person is the source of the difficult behaviors, or whether the fed-up person has more equal responsibility and needs to do personal growth.

3. When we agree that the other person (not present at this meeting!) is the source of persistent difficult behaviors, we form a “circle of boundaries” or “super-organism”: Individuals in the group take on one of three different roles (see details below), as we all work together to respond effectively.

4. Three roles in the circle of boundaries: Some individuals accept a designation as (1) “**communications people**,” thus giving the (2) **stressed people** a chance to step away from the dynamic and focus on their personal growth process. (3) **Others** help hold the circle and the group intention to focus on healing and boundaries.

5. If the communications people become too stressed to continue, we will repeat this meeting to see if anyone else has energy to take on the role.

6. We also agree in these meetings that Plan B is an exit strategy. If we haven’t crafted an exit strategy yet, we may begin to talk (either in the meetings or in smaller conversations afterwards) about what a rational exit strategy might look like. Agreeing to a “Plan B: Exit Strategy” helps the stressed people emotionally disengage as they know their community mates are serious about enforcing the community’s boundaries.

This strategy is a “superorganism” communal strategy because it is not possible for an individual to employ this strategy alone. Think about your personal options in response to a difficult relationship. You cannot both disengage and engage at the same time the way a community superorganism can.

The superorganism boundary circle is possible only when an individual can trust their community-mates to help deal with the difficulty, even while one steps back and works on personal growth. This requires faith! And being on the same team! It cannot be forced. It arose spontaneously in our group and it works well because we trust each other. (The person stepping back may need to focus on “trusting others, even when they don’t do it the same way I would do it” as part of the personal growth process.)

As for the person in the center of the circle, the one for whom boundaries are being set: The boundary circle is not a “punishment” and shouldn’t be weaponized against this person. “We made a boundary circle for you!” should never be spoken explicitly to them. They aren’t being targeted or called out. They are in the center of the circle in this model because we recognize them as belonging with us, no better or worse than anyone else, fully human, and deserving of our full love and respect. We may be the one in the center in a future conflict. How would

we wish to be treated?

The communications people are chosen because they have the capacity to be human and loving towards the person in the center, to reach for their goodness. While they agree that the group’s boundaries are reasonable, they are not feeling triggered or especially emotional about the topic. They should focus on being relaxed and prioritizing connection. At the same time, they are bold enough to directly question and respond to inappropriate behavior. This takes skill and guts.

The people who have reached capacity and need to turn away/turn inwards are also not weaponizing their feelings towards the person in the center. Rather, they are focused on their own self-care and growth. They recognize their own emotional state as one in which their reactions to the person are likely to be unhelpful—triggered, upset, blaming, demanding, or eliciting inappropriate behaviors in themselves or others. They withdraw into a healing state to work on reducing their reactivity in this and future conflicts.

The other people in the circle may seem passive in this model, but they have an active role to play, too. They help hold the shape of the circle (metaphorically speaking) by participating in the support meetings, by agreeing that the boundaries are reasonable, and by cooling inflamed emotions when necessary. For example, they might listen to the personal growth efforts of those who have reached capacity; their role then is to remember that everyone is good, and not get pulled into blame. They would remind the person doing growth work to focus on themselves and what they need to change, not on what the other person is doing wrong.

We know the group has run out of emotional resources to handle the situation if:

- The communications people become maxed out and need to focus on self-growth, and nobody else has the resources to step into the role of communicating with the person who has persistent difficult behaviors.
- Blaming and scapegoating become the dominant strategy (rather than a temporary lapse during personal growth efforts).
- The circle dissolves as people stop trusting each other. Criticisms are leveled towards those who should be your allies. This is a form of horizontal hostility.
- People who are working well in the community indicate that they are considering moving out because they can’t handle the situation.

In a group with strong long-term relationships of trust among core residents, the first bullet point above is the most frequent indication to move to Plan B and implement an exit strategy for the person with persistent difficult behaviors. In groups with less secure attachments, bullet points two through four may be the first indication.

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If you live in a community without secure long-term relationships, you will need to decide whether to salvage love from the ashes of this mess. Do you persist, bond with others who are staying, and work on creating structures that avoid future

blow-ups of this nature? As long as your community's legal and financial structures support the creation of this kind of resilient group continuity, sheer stubbornness may be the primary requirement for you to help form a long-term bonded community superorganism.

In every case, notice that I am not saying "the difficult person is bad and needs to leave." Rather, I believe "the community doesn't have the resources to address these difficulties. We need to be realistic about what we can handle right now and protect what is working."

There are many reasons why a person may exhibit persistent difficult behaviors. Some of them are temporary, and many are related to developmental stages. For example:

- Toddlers and adolescents go through rapid periods of brain growth in which they find it difficult to consider their impact on others.

- Pregnant women and women in perimenopause experience hormonally-induced mood swings and irritability.

- People undergoing medical gender transition and those who are taking prednisone or similar treatments for autoimmune disorders may have medication-induced mood swings and irritability.

- People who are quitting smoking or stopping their use of other addictive substances have a transition period for learning new ways to cope with emotions and stress.

- Many people have survived traumatic experiences like domestic violence, sexual assault, loss of a home due to fire or extreme weather events, active military duty, or the death of a loved one. After the difficult experience stops, the survivor needs time to recover in a safe container of kind people. During this recovery time, it may be difficult for the survivor to consider their impact on others.

- Some elders experience cognitive decline (of which there are various types). Memory loss is only one symptom; emotional volatility, changes in personality, anxiety, aggression, hallucinations, and inappropriate behavior are all possible effects of age-related cognitive decline.

We need to develop resilience strategies to rally around each other when we go through periods like those described above. At its most basic, a lifespan-nurturing long-term community must be able to hold appropriate and nurturing boundaries for toddlers, adolescents, pregnant and perimenopausal women, and elders. When we lack familiarity with the loving, close, tolerant, and clear communication required for these relationships, we fail ourselves as well as failing others. We have a lot to learn—and a superorganism to develop—as we create a community that can hold us in every age and stage.

As we bump up against the limits of our capacity, we need to remember that we live in larger communities that can provide resources to us. For example, a 10-year-old boy in our history exhibited persistent difficult behaviors. We held a boundary circle for his mother, where we clearly communicated the limits of our community resources. She responded by enrolling her child in school and in summer camps. His time away from home immediately relieved the burden on our community. In addition, the child had more of his needs met, and his behavior

Heart-Culture's Community Ownership/Decision-Making Structure

1. Two overlapping circles of consensus (with three levels of decision-making):
 - a. Onsite owners
 - b. All owners (both onsite and offsite)
 - c. Residents (both onsite owners and renters who have passed their new resident review process)
2. Renters self-select their level of participation (above a required minimum):
 - a. Required minimum ("Pay, Do, and Communicate"):
 - 3+ hours per week of community labor
 - Fulfill normal responsibilities of any renter (pay rent, keep premises clean, etc)
 - Follow community policies re: drugs, public screen use, etc.
 - Be responsive to attempts to resolve interpersonal conflicts
 - b. Optional but highly recommended (Opportunities to communicate):
 - Attend weekly meetings
 - Eat together at least once per week (4 community dinners/week)
 - c. Leadership track (Take more responsibility, make deeper commitments; act like an owner, become an owner):
 - Build strong relationships with the current owners
 - Help solve conflicts that arise from living together
 - Help resolve problems with infrastructure or other material community needs
 - Participate in an advisory role in owners decisions (both in formal meetings and informal conversations)
3. LLC owners naturally lean more on those who participate more.
4. This results in high-participating renters being invited to owners meetings (because we want their thinking). This is a form of mentorship towards ownership.
5. Renters cannot formally block owners decisions, but their thinking can sway the outcome of decisions.

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improved. The family stayed.

If we end up invoking an exit strategy, that is not a failure. We are learning and growing the entire time. There's no reason to blame the person with persistent difficult behaviors. If anything, it's the community that has limitations (and thus, limits). That's not to say we need to blame ourselves—rather, let's acknowledge that we start from a deficit in an individualistic society that has not taught us to meet real human needs. As we relearn these ancient communal skills, we will experience situations and relationships that we are not yet able to address without separation. Fortunately, we also have the opportunity for a transcendent experience of connection as we work with trusted others to form a superorganism in response to difficulties. 🌱

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Healing, Connection, and Escaping the Seduction of Communal “Harmony”

By Daway Chou-Ren and Devin Gleeson



ranged from run-of-the-mill resentments to deep, unresolved disagreements about values. For instance, Daway once proclaimed that we all did personal development so we could be more capable of having impact in the world. One housemate piped up immediately, furious and defensive: “No. Speak for yourself! Maybe some of us do this work just because we care about being better people!” Instead of using our fissures as portals to healing, transformation, or collaboration, we let them lie unexamined. They became like old wallpaper, invisible, normalized, tip-toed around, accommodated, rationalized, and unacknowledged. In some cases, we simply grew accustomed to not liking each other very much, and to not admitting this was so.

Living like this had consequences. To wit, the value-disagreement between Daway and the other housemate, which was never addressed outright, played out ongoingly in subtle and destructive relational dynamics throughout our time together until one day, Daway said he was done living with her. In other cases, the seams would occasionally burst on our harmonious way of being with interpersonal flare-ups. We thought by being permissive about these flare-ups, we were “evolved,” but without real tools for healing or transforming what was behind them, all we were doing was yelling loudly, spinning our wheels, and then acting like we were okay.

To be fair, life together wasn’t hell. But it also wasn’t the elusive Love-and-Connection Fest we claimed to want.

Eventually, we moved out of Bridge House and started a new community: Confluence. We recognized that something in Bridge House had not worked. We thought that having a clearer purpose

We (Daway and Devin) started collaborating on communities in the late 2010s at an edgy, exploratory intentional community called Bridge House. If you had asked Bridge House’s members, we would have said we were aiming at something like deep human connection. We were a group of wild people with shared interests in sexuality, personal growth, interpersonal relating, and experimentation.

Bridge House’s explorations were mostly informal, but also happened formally in two main ways:

- 1) Most of us shared the same tantric-adjacent, partnered meditation practice which we would engage in regularly.
- 2) We woke each weekday morning at 6:45, huddled together in the living room, and engaged in morning check-ins.

Check-ins were sacrosanct. They were our communal pride—our chance to play, love, connect, and experiment. We demanded each check-in be different. Once, we delivered acting monologues. Another time, we drew each other nude. Sometimes we played intimacy games and asked probing questions. Sometimes we grieved or laughed or engaged in craziness, like drinking mystery juice or seeing how long we could all hold our arms out parallel to the floor while staring into each others’ eyes. (We lasted 20 minutes.)

Although we thought we were aiming at deep connection, in retrospect what we were really committed to was sustaining something along the lines of “harmony.” This was nowhere more evident than in our unwillingness and inability to navigate relational fissures.

In almost every relationship in the community, fissures existed. This would be obvious to anyone attending our check-ins who peeked below the surface. Fissures

would help. So at Confluence, we asked, “Who are we?”¹ We repeatedly went through visioning exercises from reputable sources like *Living Better Together*. We even filled out and analyzed anonymous surveys where we rated each other on things like “How close am I to this person?” “How much do I like this person?” “How could this person be a better community member?” and then shared the results in communal discussions.

We did not shy away from experimenting, processing, and workshopping. We did anything we thought might create more connection, and pursued to no end an idea of closeness that would forever obliterate our unmet childhood needs around separation. We thought that if we could just get to that particular experience of connection, if we could just give each other clear and accurate enough feedback, if we all committed to hugging each other six times a day, if we had communal dinner, if we took psychedelics together, if we did weekly dates with one another, if we shared appreciations, then we would finally achieve steady-state communal bliss that would make any fissures irrelevant.

This approach did not work. The fissures remained. The commitment to harmony, noble as it was, created a community of compromise, getting by and getting along, numbness, denial, and a quality of tolerance that had more to do with resignation than with love.

In the end, we had more questions than answers: What is needed to create a community where there is authentic connection? Is connection even a worthwhile aim? How do you effectively work with fissures? What else is possible?

Put Creation at the Center of Community, and Connection Follows

The two of us left Confluence and parted ways during COVID-19, but our questions remained open. These questions led us both to begin exploring the “gameworld” of Possibility Management² and Possibility Management trainings. In essence, Possibility Management is a collection of distinctions that a group of people began discovering in the mid-1970s when they started researching questions like: “What if we took higher levels of responsibility for ourselves, our communities, and our world? What would it look like practically to take higher levels of responsibility? What kind of cultures and communities would emerge if people took higher levels of responsibility?”

Participating in these trainings about raising our level of responsibility³ was revelatory for us, and provided sudden clarity about what had not been working in our previous communal endeavors. Two distinctions were especially eye-opening as we formed a new community in rural New York called Magic Cow⁴.

The first distinction was about communities and connection. Many communities form with the purpose of creating more connection. In reality, though, if a community’s goal is connection, its goal is achieved already at the very first meeting: People are together and they are connecting. The only place to go from there is to attempt to create more and more and deeper and deeper connection. But to what end? We noticed in our previous communal pursuits that sometimes we were more connected, sometimes less. There were peaks of bliss that we settled for reaching now and then, but lasting connection eluded us.

One of the proposals we started playing with at the Magic Cow was to remove con-



Magic Cow’s core five members during an “Intimacy Cafe,” a moment to nourish our bellies with sweets and our hearts with connection. Left to right: Eithne, Nicole, Meredith, Daway, Devin.



Ingrid and Nicole share a moment of connection together.



Photos courtesy of Daway Chou-Ren



Left to right: Devin, Nicole, Eithne, Meredith, Daway.



An emotional healing process Meredith is holding for Devin.

nection as the central goal of the community, and to instead regard it as a byproduct of our co-creations and projects. This new orientation changed the questions we were asking as a community from “How can we be even more connected?” to “What do you want to work on next? Who wants to join me in this project? What are you (and what am I) turned on to make?”

As we began creating together—cooking, delivering transformational trainings, building a chicken coop, building a pig pen, clearing hiking trails, and engaging in emotional healing experimentation—the burden of wondering why we weren’t all a perfect fit dissipated. Just as you can see a faint star most clearly not by looking directly at it but by glancing to its side, focusing on these projects allowed us to bask in the glow of the connection and community that our mutual undertakings created without obsessing about and reworking our relational dynamics to death.

The scourge of being dissatisfied and chasing after the “perfect” connection no longer undermined our community, and instead the energy once expended on relational drama was poured straight into creation and collaboration. What emerged was a kind of relational simplicity: We appreciated and cherished each other. We even undertook an intimacy project that was unburdened by expectation. We set a purposefully unattainable goal of doing 1,000 activities together (in groups of at least two) in one week. Every activity, even walking up the stairs or brushing our teeth, became a joyous possibility for connection.

The second potent distinction we brought into the Magic Cow concerned the difference between *feelings* and *emotions*. This distinction transformed how we related and what we did with fissures.

Feelings (anger, sadness, fear, joy) generally last three minutes or less, are about the present moment, and when the energy and information from the feelings are used, the feeling goes away.

Emotions (also anger, sadness, fear, joy) often feel identical to feelings. The difference is that emotions are connected to unhealed childhood wounds from the past. An emotion is triggered when something in the present reminds us of one of these wounds. Often, this “reminder” is invisible to us. It can seem like the emotion is about what is happening right here and right now. The easiest way to differentiate between a feeling and an emotion is that emotions last longer than three minutes—maybe an hour, a day, or a month. Additionally, emotions do not go away if you take action on them in the present, because their root is in the past. If you’ve ever been in a fight with someone and the fight just keeps going no matter what compromises, apologies, or negotiations you try, then you are familiar with the mucky experience of being in an emotion. Eventually, the intensity of the emotion dissipates into numbness, but it doesn’t really go away. It simply waits for the next “reminder” to be reactivated.

On learning this distinction between emotions and feelings, we recognized that what we had called fissures were almost always the result of emotions—unhealed wounds from the past. At Bridge House and Confluence, we tiptoed around these emotions in favor of “harmony.” At Magic Cow, we created a culture where when emotions surfaced, they were immediately acknowledged and used as gateways for Emotional Healing Processes (EHPs).

Emotional Healing Processes, the Two-Week Experiment, and A New Kind of Connection

In an EHP, a “spaceholder” holds space for a “client” to explore and resolve their emotional reactivity. At Magic Cow, we all trained ourselves to hold space for EHPs.

EHPs usually go like this: A client discovers that they are experiencing an emotion—anger, sadness, fear, joy, or a mixture that lasts longer than three minutes. The client asks for a spaceholder who helps them feel their emotional reactivity as big as it really is. Because most of us have been trained to be polite members of society, what we think is “as big as it really is” is often just a fraction of what the body wants to express. In an EHP, you will hear angry yelling or pitiful wailing or fearful screaming. You might see fists or mucous waterworks or body shaking. The client has complete permission and encouragement to go as immature, wild, or nonsensical as their body wants to make it.

The client feels and begins to say the

words that come with the emotions. The spaceholder asks questions like: “What are you feeling—anger, sadness, fear, or joy? Let the emotions get bigger.” Eventually, the client lands in a body memory and the questions shift to deepening the memory. “Is it daytime or nighttime? Are you inside or outside? Where are you? Are you alone or with other people? Who are you speaking to? What is happening?”

The client speaks and continues to feel. A certain completeness comes just from speaking and feeling the old emotion. But as they go deeper into the memory, they often discover big decisions they made at that time—decisions that continue to affect their lives.

An example memory might be something like this:

1) Dave’s dad yells at him for not being perfectly neat.

2) Dave feels sad and angry, and tries to speak up, but his dad yells at him even more, effectively cutting off Dave’s voice.

3) Dave is shut down. His anger and sadness never get completely used. Instead, they become incomplete emotions. He becomes terrified of speaking because speaking means he gets yelled at.

4) Dave decides unconsciously, “I will never be heard. My feelings don’t matter. What I have to say isn’t important. If I speak, I get yelled at. Best to stay quiet.”

Dave’s old emotions and unconscious decisions continue to govern his life. At the communal level, this might manifest as Dave never speaking at meetings and being completely out of touch with his feelings. Anytime someone gets loud or angry in a way that reminds him of his father, Dave might get quiet and retreat

into himself. As a result, Dave feels isolated. He doesn’t create the kind of closeness he wants, and people in the community might feel very distant from him.

During an EHP, Dave would get a chance to feel all of this, see the origin of his decisions and how they are running his life, and make new, more empowering decisions. New decisions might be: “I use my feelings to speak,” “My voice is wonderful,” “I use my voice to create closeness,” “I love sharing what is inside me.” These are not superficial affirmations. At the end of an EHP when a person has felt the emotions and gone to the origin of their wound, these decisions have gravity. Magic occurs, the emotion is gone, and a new and freer life opens up.

Genuine healing is magnetic. It’s enlivening. At Magic Cow, we made healing a community-wide project by committing to two weeks straight of each going through at least one EHP per day. We did this with each other and for each other, all in the same room at the same time. We often used the relational fissures that emerged in our daily lives as doorways for entering these EHPs. Healing at Magic Cow was a public event that was celebrated rather than something private that was stigmatized or therapized.

What was it like to do healing at this communal level? New, scary, fun, loud, collaborative, and insanely bonding. We were in the thick of things, caring for and empowering each other in a deeply vulnerable way. When we came out of our healing processes, our faces were changed. They were looser, more vibrant. Years of stored up emotionality fell off, and we had each other to thank for it. The fissures went away, and what remained was a wonderful byproduct of connection, present in a quality and abundance we had not imagined possible. 🐮

As of now, there are about 750 people collaborating on learning how to hold Emotional Healing Processes. It is free to join. See possibilitymanagement.org/resources and t.me/joinchat/WC5Px3vhJLpGU-Cz. For more information contact the authors at dawachouren@gmail.com and devingleeson4@gmail.com.

Daway Chou-Ren is a communitarian who experienced something close to unconditional love in a community 10 years ago and never looked back. He is a former empathy researcher and is dedicated to collaborating on communities that invent energetic and feelings-based transformational processes that help people evolve in the direction of love, aliveness, and responsibility. The projects he works on are at www.dawaychouren.com.

Devin Gleeson discovered Seattle’s intentional communities in his late 20s. From his first communal encounter, he was smitten. Since then, he has ongoingly cofounded, lived in, and visited communities of every type and size. As a Possibility Management trainer and facilitator, he holds spaces for communities to upgrade their thoughtware and transform themselves into laboratories of evolution, love, and collaboration. You can reach him at devingleeson4@gmail.com.



A joyous group dinner. Left to right: Meredith, Nicole, Devin, Leslie, Eithne, Georg, Ingrid, Daway.



Left to right, top to bottom: Nicole, Devin, Meredith, Eithne, Georg, Ingrid, Leslie, Daway.

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PUBLICATIONS, BOOKS, WEBSITES, WORKSHOPS, EVENTS

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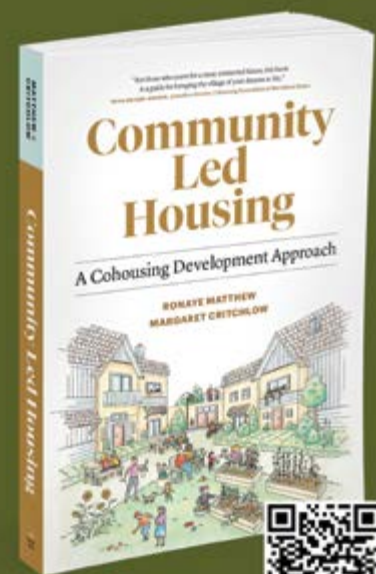


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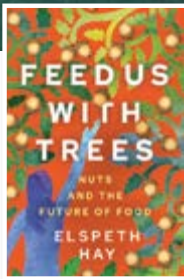
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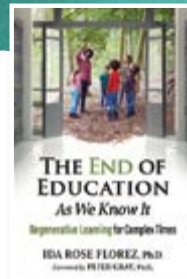
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News from the FIC

At the Foundation for Intentional Community (FIC), we're proud of how we serve the growing movement of intentional communities. Thousands of seekers utilize our online directory to find their home. Our courses and workshops educate those creating and living in communities. We introduce the public to cooperative lifestyles through speaking with reporters and at events.

And, of course, we want to do so much more! Here are some ways the FIC is striving build our *community of communities* in 2025 and beyond:

- **Monthly Webinars:** We're planning on expanding our panel discussions, interviews, and open calls to provide forums for community members to share their expertise and challenges on vital topics such as leadership succession, economic models, and deep adaptation.

- **CIC 2025:** We're excited to build on the success of our first Convergence of Intentional Communities last fall at Twin Oaks and further develop Working Groups to collaborate on projects such as business development, ecological resiliency, bioregional gatherings, academic research, and more.

- **Global Networking:** The FIC is a lead partner organization in the North American Region of the Global Ecovillage Network (a.k.a. GENNA) and we are exploring ways to engage more with ICs in Europe, Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Oceania. For example, this August, FIC Co-Director Daniel Greenberg (who served as President of GEN from 2015-19) will represent FIC/GENNA at the 30th anniversary of GEN in Hungary, which will draw communitarians from around the world.

- **Wisdom Council:** Challenges with and within ICs sometimes find their way

to the FIC, but we rarely have the capacity or expertise to deal with them properly. We'd like to help create a council of trusted respected elders (and wise youth!) elected in an open process who can offer support, mediation, and guidance when needed within or between communities.

- **Forums:** While we've experimented with communication apps such as Discord and our custom-built forum, we continue to explore platforms that can support many-to-many communications and collaborations across communities. We're keeping an eye on Blue Sky (bsky.app; the new open-source alternative to X) and Hylo (hylo.com/app), a community-led, pro-social coordination platform for purpose-driven groups.

How might you and your community serve and be served by greater collaboration across our growing network of ICs? Together, we can model and catalyze the change we all wish to manifest in the world! Thanks for all you do and we look forward to our next opportunity to connect!

Visit ic.org to learn more.



ENGAGE with the communities
MOVEMENT

Join FIC today

ic.org/membership 

- ✓ Connect with change-makers fostering resilient, cooperative & sustainable lifestyles
- ✓ Access a wealth of educational materials and events
- ✓ Have a voice in advocating for the needs and interests of ICs

 FOUNDATION FOR INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

If Your Label Says "BENEFACTOR SUB—CONTINUE?" Please Respond!

In 2024 a select group of intentional communities in the United States received complimentary print-plus-digital subscriptions to COMMUNITIES funded by a generous benefactor. In 2025 we're receiving less funding for this program, but can continue to offer *some* of those complimentary subscriptions, especially to groups who affirm their desire to receive one.

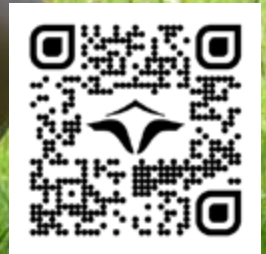
If the message above the address on your mailing envelope says "BENEFACTOR SUB—CONTINUE?" then you are one of these groups. **Please let us know asap if you would like to continue to receive a complimentary subscription.** (If you're able, you may choose to renew by paying instead.) To stay on the list you can email editor@gen-us.net or send a note to COMMUNITIES, c/o 330 Morgan St., Oberlin, OH 44074 or leave a message at 541-937-5221—otherwise this may be your last issue.

We hope to hear from you!



Wish you were here.

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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

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

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

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gen-us.net/reach

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