ISSUE #2

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Communes At Large Letter

YAD TABENKIN

International Communal Studies Association (ICSA)

INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES DESK

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the second issue of our Bulletin. Many of us have been facing challenging times, from unstable political situations to environmental disasters and even war. It is reassuring to retreat into our world of intentional communities and showcase, through these pages, the diverse tapestry of community living from around the globe.

We've had a busy year here at ICSA! In January, we hosted our first fully virtual international conference. Over three full days of presentations, we engaged with around 200 participants and enjoyed some wonderful conversations. This year, we also held our inaugural webinar, featuring our good friends and board members: Bill Metcalf, Jan Bang, Iris Kunze, and Taisa Mattos.

We are currently planning our next webinar, which will take place in a couple of months. Please keep checking our usual channels for the exact date and speaker details. Additionally, preparations are well underway for our next in-person conference, scheduled for July 10th-14th, 2026. We hope to release a revised Call for Papers in the coming weeks.

So what can you find over the following pages? Well, we have stories featuring the full gamut of models of intentional communities: co-housing, ecovillages, communes, kibbutz, co-living and the Bruderhof, each with their own story to tell, which are both unique and ring familiar for many of us living in community.

Talking of the Bruderhof, I'd like to take this opportunity to send our heartfelt condolences to Martin Johnson and the rest of Maple Ridge Bruderhof, on the passing of his dear wife of 47 years, Burgel. Wishing you peace and comfort during this hard time.

You can send us your suggestions, corrections, contributions and retributions regarding this Bulletin, to the email address below,

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My big move: I was a single mum living in a sharehouse. A commune gave us a stable place to call home

We held festivals, started an energy cooperative and reduced our waste to almost nothing. But there are downsides to putting idealists of all stripes together

Beth Knights
Sun 31 Dec 2023
The Guardian

Some time ago I was a single mum living in a sharehouse in Melbourne's inner north. While not an ideal housing scenario, I couldn't afford to live alone, and I didn't want to. Single parenting is isolating and about as far from "it takes a village" as it gets. But what *is* the ideal way to raise a kid? And where are the utopian communes of the 70s now? Through the hippy grapevine, I heard whispers of a cohousing community seeking new members. To clarify, cohousing is a model of intentional community with independent dwellings and shared living spaces, managed collaboratively by the occupants. In other words, a commune – but with more structure and, fingers crossed, fewer wind chimes.

This particular community was open to low-income earners. And I didn't need to move to Nimbin, Copenhagen or even out of my city to find this utopia. It was being built a few suburbs away. If cohousing was good enough for dreamy Danes, it was good enough for me.

My application magnified my most idealistic self. I bragged of an endearing, slightly unusual skillset: milking goats, making sauerkraut; a saint-like patience when making decisions by consensus. When I was selected to join I bawled my eyes out. After moving 11 times in less than 10 years of parenting, it would be a stable place to call home.

'When we eventually moved in, it was a bleak building site with no heart, so we rolled up our sleeves and got stuck in.' Photograph: Beth Knights

Initially, while our newly formed community waited for our units to be built, we would meet for bring-a-plate communal dinners and share our collectivist dreams. It was a honeymoon period – all giddy with oxytocin and a smorgasbord of desserts. We were in love with our untarnished ideas of a shared life. What did it matter that I didn't digest lentils all that well? What came out the other end was a problem for another day.

When we eventually moved in, it was a bleak building site with no heart, so we rolled up our sleeves and got stuck in. We held working bees, planted gardens and adorned common spaces with op-shop finds. Kids played dress-ups or Dungeons and Dragons while adults relaxed with a wine. So much of what I had hoped for was real.

It didn't take us long to develop a culture all of our own. During a birthday celebration, when asked to sing the special song, the littlest kid started up Twinkle Twinkle Little Star and soon after, it was the only birthday refrain. Mother's Days meant children were on pancakes. Thursday nights were for salsa dancing. I've never been one for Latin music, but I love that we tumbled out of our tiny homes to dance together and stumbled home a few sangrias later.

There are downsides to putting idealists of all persuasions into a single arena. Some days it was genuinely all rainbows. Others were like placing a lion, a chicken, a llama and a chihuahua together in one cage. I grew tired of ideological warfare and I started to miss privacy; the freedom to visit the compost bin without being intercepted. "Have you put your name up for a working group?" "Can you help prep for the common meal tonight?" "Don't forget the whole group meeting this Sunday!" Life beyond the community began to feel like a distant dream.

The compost heaps at the cohousing community. Photograph: Beth Knight

Communal life is a lot of work and a mountain of emotional labour. I had no idea just how many "meetings" intentional living required – whole group meetings, subcommittee meetings, board meetings. On the upside there's a sense of achievement that comes with group effort – many hands and all that. We held festivals, started our own energy cooperative and reduced our waste output to almost nothing. We strived and we bled for it.

By the time I started crying, frequently and in public, I had to admit to myself that I couldn't meet the relentless demands of my dynamic home while *also* managing the rest of my life – parenting, working and a dwindling but non-negotiable artistic pursuit. At our annual community retreat, I blubbered through tears: "I don't want to be in a relationship with 35 people any more!" This was followed by all the it's-me-not-you platitudes I could muster. I went through the full gamut of emotion one would with any breakup.

When, after five wonderfully complicated years I finally decided to move out of the community, I knew exactly what I was giving up. It still rates as one of the most difficult decisions I've made. Sure, I was forfeiting stable and affordable housing, but what I was going to miss the most was the accompanying sense of belonging, the incidental cups of tea and the collectively shared rituals of daily life.

For now I live a mainstream domestic life with a private yard, a boyfriend and a dog. Community still matters but I engage with it through more traditional means. I volunteer and take part in local events, contributing to the social and cultural fabric of my neighbourhood. And yet I still dream about better ways to live.

For all the effort and angst, it's the stuff left over after our differences subside that matters. Sharing anniversaries, illnesses, celebrations, grief – this is where cohousing shines. Being a human on a crash course through life is best spent collectively. And that's not an ideal, that's just a fact.

Israeli kibbutz struggles to heal, one year after 7 October

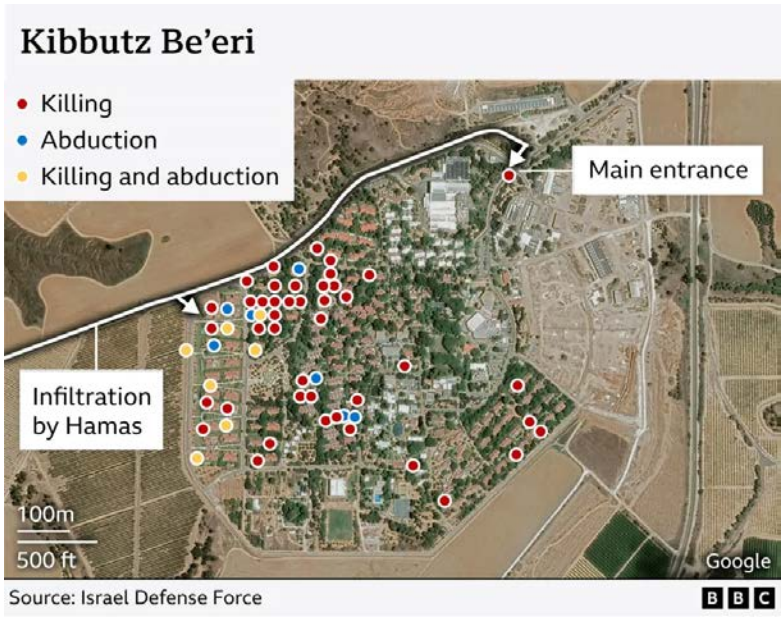
5 October 2024
Alice Cuddy, Southern Israel - BBC

A few metres from a charred home in Kibbutz Be'eri, Simon King tends to a patch of ground in the sunshine. The streets around him are eerily quiet, the silence punctuated only by the sound of air strikes that ring in the near distance.
In this community almost a year ago, 101 people were killed after gunmen from Hamas and other groups rampaged through Be'eri's tree-lined streets, burning homes and shooting people indiscriminately. Another 30 residents and their family members were taken to Gaza as hostages.
Survivors hid in safe rooms all day and long into the night - exchanging horrifying details with each other over community WhatsApp groups, as they tried to make sense of what was happening.

Many homes at Be'eri were burnt and destroyed

The kibbutz was a strong community, where people lived and operated together as one. Neighbours were more like extended family. It is one of a small number of kibbutzim in Israel that still operates as a collective.
But now, post-7 October, the collective is splintered - psychologically and physically.
About one in 10 were killed. Only a few of the survivors have returned to their homes. Some travel back to the kibbutz daily to work, but can't face overnight stays. Many, after months in a hotel, are now living in prefabricated buildings on another kibbutz 40km (25 miles) away.
The community, built up over nearly 80 years, is being tested like never before, and its future is uncertain.
There are reminders everywhere of those who didn't survive - says Dafna Gerstner, who grew up in Be'eri, and spent 19 terrifying hours on 7 October holed up in a safe room - designed to protect residents from rocket attacks.

"You look to the left and it's like, 'Oh it's my friend who lost her parents.' You look to the right, 'It's my friend who lost her father,' [and then] 'She lost her mother.' It's everywhere you look."



Inside Be'eri, surrounded by a high fence topped with barbed wire, you are never far from a house completely burnt or destroyed, or an empty patch of land where a home, wrecked that day, has been demolished.

Some streets might, upon first glance, appear almost untouched - but look closely and even there you will see markings spray-painted on walls by military units on or after 7 October. Houses where people were killed or kidnapped have black banners on the facades with their names and photos.

In the carcass of one burnt-out home, a board game rests on top of a coffee table, next to a melted television remote control. Food, long-rotten, is still in the fridge-freezer and the smell of burning lingers.

"Time stood still in the house," says Dafna, 40, as she pokes through the ash-covered wreckage. She and her family had been playing that board game on the eve of the attacks. Here, her disabled father and his Filipina carer hid for hours in their fortified safe room, as their home burned down around them. Dafna says it is a miracle they both survived.

A board game and a melted remote control - both covered in dust - capture how ordinary life at the kibbutz was suddenly interrupted

Her brother did not. A member of Be'eri's emergency response squad, he was killed in a gunfight at the kibbutz's dental clinic. Dafna was staying in his house at the time, on a visit from her home in Germany.

Dozens of buildings in Be'eri are spattered with bullet holes - including the nursery. The play park and petting zoo are empty. No children have moved back, and the animals have been sent to new homes.

The kibbutz's empty streets sometimes come alive, though, in a surprising way - with organised tours for visitors, who give donations.

Israeli soldiers, and some civilians from Israel and abroad, come to see the broken homes, and hear accounts of the devastation, in order to understand what happened.
Two of those who volunteer to lead the tours, Rami Gold and Simon King, say they are determined to ensure what happened here is remembered.
Simon, 60, admits this can be a difficult process.
"There's a lot of mixed feelings and [the visitors] don't really know what to ask but they can see and hear and smell… it's a very heavy emotional experience."

Spray-painted markings on the outside of houses indicates where people were killed

Rami, 70, says these occasions are often followed by restless nights. Each tour, he says, takes him back to 7 October.
He is one of the few who moved back to Be'eri after the attacks.

And the tours are not popular with everyone. "At some point it felt like someone took over the kibbutz - everybody was there," Dafna says.
But Simon says the stories have to be told. "Some don't like it because it's their home and you don't want people rummaging around," he says. "But you have to send the message out, otherwise it will be forgotten."
At the same time, both he and Rami say they are looking to the future, describing themselves as "irresponsible optimists". They continue to water the lawns and fix fences, amid the destruction, as others build new homes that will replace those destroyed.
Simon describes the rebuilding as therapy.

Established in 1946, Be'eri is one of 11 Jewish communities in this region set up before the creation of the state of Israel. It was known for its left-leaning views, and many of its residents believed in, and advocated for, peace with the Palestinians.
After the attacks, many residents were moved into a hotel by the Dead Sea - the David Hotel - some 90 minutes' drive away.
In the aftermath of the attacks, I witnessed their trauma.
Shell-shocked residents gathered in the lobby and other communal areas, as they tried to make sense of what had happened, and who they had lost, in hushed conversations.
Some children clung to their parents as they spoke.
Still now, they say, the conversations have not moved on.
"Every person I speak to from Be'eri - it always goes back to this day. Every conversation is going back to dealing with it and the effects after it. We are always talking about it again and again and again," says Shir Guttentag.
Like her friend Dafna, Shir was holed up that day in her safe room, attempting to reassure terrified neighbours on the WhatsApp group as Hamas gunmen stormed through the kibbutz, shooting residents and setting homes on fire.

Shir twice dismantled the barricade of furniture she had made against her front door to let neighbours in to hide. She told her children, "it's OK, it's going to be OK" as they waited to be rescued.
When they were eventually escorted to safety, she looked down at the ground, not wanting to see the remains of her community.
In the coming months at the Dead Sea hotel, Shir says she struggled as people began to leave - some to homes elsewhere in the country or to stay with families, others seeking to escape their memories by heading abroad.
Each departure was like "another break-up, another goodbye", she says.
It is no longer unusual to see someone who is crying or looking sad among Be'eri's grieving residents.

Prefabricated homes in Kibbutz Hatzerim - the majority of Be'eri's survivors will live here for the moment

"In normal days it would have been like, 'What happened? Are you OK?' Nowadays everyone can cry and no-one asks him why," Shir says.
Shir and her daughters, along with hundreds of other Be'eri survivors, have now moved to new, identical prefabricated homes, paid for by the Israeli government, on an expanse of barren land at another kibbutz, Hatzerim - about 40-minutes drive from Be'eri.
I was there on moving day.

It feels a world away from the manicured lawns of Be'eri, though grass has now been planted around the neighbourhood.
When single mother Shir led her daughters, aged nine and six, into their new bungalow, she told me her stomach was turning from excitement and nerves.
She checked the door to the safe room, where her children will sleep every night, noting that it felt heavier than the door at Be'eri. "I don't know if it's bulletproof. I hope so," she said.
She chose not to bring many items from Be'eri because she wants to keep her home there as it was - and to remind herself that she will one day return.

Shir says she was glad to be able to finally show her daughters - aged nine and six - their new home for now

The mass move to Hatzerim happened after it was put to a community vote - as is the case with all major kibbutz decisions.
It is estimated about 70% of Be'eri's survivors will live there for the time being. About half of the kibbutz's residents have moved in so far, but more homes are on the way.

The journey from Hatzerim to Be'eri is shorter than it was from the hotel - and many people make the trip every day, to work in one of the kibbutz's businesses, as they did before.
Shir travels to Be'eri to work at its veterinary clinic, but can't imagine returning to live there yet.
"I don't know what needs to happen, but something drastic, so I can feel safe again."
In the middle of the day, the Be'eri lunch hall fills with people as they gather to eat together.
Shir, like many others, has reluctantly applied for a gun licence, never wanting to be caught off-guard again.
"It's for my daughters and myself because, on the day, I didn't have anything," she says.
Her mother's long-term partner was killed that day. When they talk about it, her mother says: "They destroyed us."

Residents say they have relied on the support of their neighbours over the past year, but individual trauma has also tested a community that has historically operated as a collective.
The slogan at Be'eri is adapted from Karl Marx: "Everyone gives as much as he can and everyone gets as much as he needs." But these words have now become hard to live by.
Many residents of working age are employed by Be'eri's successful printing house, and other smaller kibbutz businesses. Profits are pooled and people receive housing and other amenities based on their individual circumstances.
However, the decision of some people not to return to work has undermined this principle of communal labour and living.
And if some residents decide they can never return to Be'eri that could, in turn, create fresh problems.
Many have little experience of non-communal living and would struggle financially if they lived independently.
The 7 October attack has also quietened calls for peace.
The kibbutz used to have a fund to support Gazans. Some residents would also help arrange medical treatment for Gazans at Israeli hospitals, members say.
Now, among some, strong views to the contrary are shared in person and on social media.
"They'll [Gazans] never accept our being here. It's either us or them," says Rami.
Several people bring up the killing of resident Vivian Silver - one of Israel's best-known peace advocates.
"For now, people are very mad," Shir says.
"People still want to live in peace, but for now, I can't see any partner on the other side.
"I don't like to think in terms of hate and anger, it's not who I am, but I can't disconnect from what happened that day."
Shir wears a necklace engraved with a portrait of her lifelong friend Carmel Gat, who was taken hostage from Be'eri that day.

Her biggest dream was that they would be reunited - but, on 1 September, Carmel's body was found alongside five other hostages.

The IDF said they had been killed by Hamas just hours before a planned rescue attempt. Hamas said the hostages were killed in air strikes - but an autopsy on the returned bodies concluded they had all been shot multiple times at close range.
Be'eri is still waiting and hoping for the return of others. So far, 18 have been brought back alive, along with two dead bodies, while 10 are still in Gaza, at least three of whom are believed to still be alive.
Behind Dafna's father's house, 37-year-old Yuval Haran stands in front of the home where his father was killed, and many relatives were taken hostage, on 7 October. His brother-in-law Tal is still being held in Gaza.
"Until he comes back, my clock is still on 7 October. I don't want revenge, I just want my family back, I just want to have a quiet peaceful life again," Yuval says.

Rami and Simon have been digging graves for Be'eri's dead, whose bodies have recently been brought back to the kibbutz

In all, some 1,200 people were killed across southern Israel on 7 October, with 251 taken to Gaza as hostages. Since then, in the Israeli military operation in Gaza, more than 41,000 people have been killed according to the Hamas-run health ministry.
Hundreds of people - combatants and civilians - have also been killed in Lebanon in Israeli air strikes against the armed group Hezbollah, in a significant escalation of their long-running conflict.
Residents from Be'eri say that before 7 October, despite their proximity to the Gaza fence, they always felt safe - such was their faith in the Israeli military system. But that faith has now been shaken.
"I'm less confident and I'm less trusting," Shir says.
She relives the events in her dreams.
"I wake up and I remind myself it's over. But the trauma is, I think, for life. I don't know if I can ever feel fully safe again."
This summer Rami and Simon also took on the sombre task of digging graves for Be'eri's dead, who are only just being moved back to the kibbutz from cemeteries elsewhere in Israel.
"After the 7th [October] this area was a military zone, we couldn't bury them here," says Rami, as he looks over the graves, a rifle slung across his body.
Simon says it brings up strong and passionate feelings - "but in the end they're back at home".
Each time a person is returned, the kibbutz holds a second funeral, with many residents in attendance.
Shir, in the temporary site at Hatzerim, says that for now, she is drawing strength from the community around her.
"We're not whole, but we will be I hope," she says.
"It's a grieving community - sadder and angrier - but still a strong community."

Confronting Conflict

By Tracy Matfin
Communities Magazine #203 – Summer 2024

Last week I was having garden fresh mint tea with a visitor to our community. She was talking about her daughter, who was home with her dad, and asked me how my family group dealt with conflict with our daughter, Ai'ala, who was off 100 yards away with some friends. I thought about it and started talking, sharing examples. In doing so I realized there have been raised voices at times, and there have definitely been frustrations, but overall we are rather harmonious.

We have raised Ai'ala primarily through accepting and allowing emotional expression, communication, and love—the consistent choice to stay engaged in relationship. As I look deeper I am noticing this is also how we create a lot of harmony at La'akea Community. This community began three years before our daughter was born. She is 15 now, so they have kind of grown up together. Along the way we have learned a lot about conflict and confrontation.

A "conflict" is when two or more individuals have come together, *con*, to strike, *flict*, based on differing ideas or viewpoints. A contest ensues to see who can strike harder than the other until a winner is determined. This follows the paradigm of winners and losers, in which there is a dominating force that subjugates another force. One way to move beyond this paradigm is through courageously choosing to meet and talk. Instead of pursuing conflict, they turn toward, or "confront," the other—*con*, come together, *front*, face to face. This action creates opportunity for growth and vulnerability and the possibility for deeper connection and self-reflection.

The key ingredient is commitment—it is the choice to return to relationship in the face of adversity again and again.

When I first decided 25 years ago that I wanted to live in and possibly start an intentional community, a friend said to me,
"Why bother? It will *never* work." We were having tea on his porch in California.
Dumbfounded and a little crushed, I asked, "Why not?"
He replied: "Because it's too easy to leave."

Despite my discomfort with his response, I could see the profound truth in his words. Our modern-day culture is focused on individual independence. Though challenging, it is possible to get a job, have your own residence, drive your own car, etc. It is possible to live independently. The tribal culture so many are looking for did not have that freedom. The interdependence of a tribe was largely based on the need for survival. Unlike now, it was hard and dangerous to leave.

The commitment required today to create lasting relationships—to create tribe—is of a different nature. It requires a deep level of personal commitment so that when the going gets tough, the tough stay together rather than get going.

Whether in discovering how to stay in relationship with a child or with fellow community members, these four behaviors have helped us in our community and as parents:

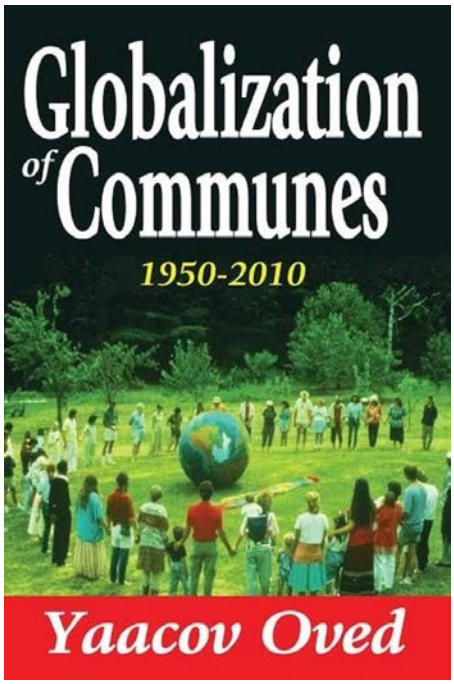
- Listen actively with your entire being.
- Accept and allow for each individual's unique humanness.
- Communicate authentically with compassion.
- Share power while honoring rank.

Each is based on love and, together, they create a culture and environment that folks want to stay in.

Exclusive Interview

Yaacov Oved, founder of ICSA, intentional communities scholar, author, historian and professor emeritus, has been a kibbutz member for an incredible 75 years.

Having written several books on the subject, Yaakov still takes an active interest in the world of intentional communities, of which he has an unrivalled breadth of knowledge, and specifically likes to be updated about the organization that he birthed almost 40 years ago, ICSA. At 95 years young, Yaakov agreed to be interviewed for this issue of the Bulletin.



So where did it all start, this lifelong passion for intentional communities?

When I first went to kibbutz, I understood that I wanted to know if there was such a phenomenon elsewhere in the world, so I started to look. I read a piece that was published in the kibbutz newspaper about the Bruderhof which sparked my curiosity, and I became interested in them, not on an academic level at first. I then started to work at the university and I was involved in different fields. Then in 1975 I started working at Yad Tabenkin, and asked myself what is it that I can offer to the new research dept there, so I returned to the topic of communes. One of my students got in contact with the Bruderhof, so in 1978/9, I travelled to the US to learn more about communes. That is basically when it all started.

How did ICSA start? What was it like at the beginning?

I visited the Shakers in Massachusetts, and in the reading room there I found a newspaper that the Communal Studies Association (CSA) had put together - I didn't know they even existed. I found a phone number, called them, and went to their conference in Omaha, Nebraska, and I met people who were interested in things similar to the kibbutz. I met Donald Pitzer and we decided to establish ICSA and create connections

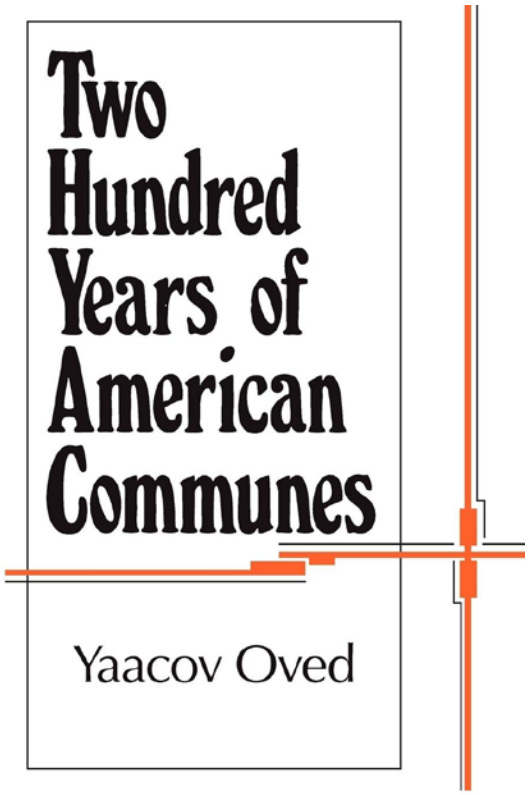
between researchers. I asked Yad Tabenkin to organise an international conference, and to my delight they agreed. Ruth Sobol became the contact person for communes all around the world and she continued to be the contact person for many, many years. We certainly couldn't have done it without her. The first ICSA conference was hosted by Yad Tabenkin in 1985.

How many communes have you visited?

I'd say about 60 communes around the world – In USA, Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Brazil, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, France, Italy, Germany, Poland, New Zealand, Australia and Britain.

What is the strangest thing that you have come across with regards to a particular commune?

Something strange or unique? I'd just say that each commune has its own ideas and its own way of doing things. Each commune is special and their motivations are different from one another, but they all have a worldview, a belief in co-operation.



Are there any communities that specifically impressed you?

I'd have to say the Bruderhof - because I discovered a very active community – a beautiful community. When I visited them in Connecticut, I entered their dining room and all community members were sitting there, and they received us by singing (a translation of) a Hebrew song. It was very emotional for me.

Have you got a message or blessing for ICSA as it reaches its 40th anniversary?

To keep the international connections that have developed, and also to deepen the social connections that exist between ICSA's members. I hope for ICSA to continue to spread the message of shared lives and mutual aid, and not a humanity of war.

Dishwasher repair

A poem about community

Courtney Martin
Mar 08, 2023
for Temescal Commons

Here you will find five handheld brooms and dustpans with children's names on them,
a persimmon tree coveted by squirrels and tended by tired humans,
a laundry line not infrequently decorated with the linens of an old, fierce woman,
a time capsule deep in the ground that doesn't contain the jeans my husband hates.
Here you will smell jasmine as you make your way to the bike shed to wrestle with the stubborn lock,
the taste of common meal—basil pesto, white rice, charred broccoli,
the feel of a child hiding under the table, brushing up against your legs while you eat the meal,
the sound of fingers plucking at a banjo floating down from the window.

Here is customized tenderness:
Pick the weed that makes your neighbor sneeze.
Approach the shy child gently.
Leave some kale for the other families.
Build a shelter for the cat, unprompted.
Hang a disco ball in the branches during a pandemic.
Try to get the recycling right, even once.
The heartbreak here is very human:
bodies that don't work like they used to,
gods that no longer serve,
squabbling siblings, boring meetings, and childhood wounds that never quite heal,
a water heater that was doomed from the start.
The lessons here are mostly endurance and delight:
no one is ever thrown away,
just order pizza and forgive yourself,
put someone else's kid in the red wagon and circle the block, even better if you blast Lizzo from your cell phone,
look in the telescope in the yard and remember how small you are,
sometimes you just have to say the thing,
sometimes you just have to not say the thing.
Here, the harvesting sometimes vexes the elder,
the car window glass glitters on the sidewalks next to the sour grass,
the church was going to be a condo but is somehow a church again,
the blackberries can be too sour some seasons.
But then, once a decade, a miniature horse shows up in the yard like a miracle,
once a day, a couple circles the block like a miracle.

Here, the chrysalis attached to the hose rack is lined with a filament of pure gold,
and somehow you don't miss it when the Monarch emerges,
as if it wanted to be witnessed despite being an ethereal thing.
And just when you can't parent one more minute someone else reads a book to your child,
then your child becomes a teenager and writes her college essay on here.
Here has given her a dozen aunties and a thing to roll her eyes at other than you.
She returns with the sturdiness of being known.
He returns fabulous in platform shoes.
The ping pong table is out, grab a beer, and watch the tiny white ball fly.
Yell to knucklehead across the yard with his constellation of puppies.
Here, the magnolias and cala lillies are almost obscene.
Sometimes it's hard to feel worthy of all this abundance.
But who are you not to enjoy a dance party in the courtyard, a glass of sour homemade lemonade, shishito peppers passed over the fence?
Who are you not to accept and offer up grace?

The simple things are never as simple as you'd expect them to be, but the hard things are much easier.
Love sometimes looks like dishwasher repair.
The nights aren't getting any quieter or safer, so we might as well worship the way here composts our human condition.

A countercultural way to live: An inside look at a modern ‘intentional community’

Sept 3, 2024

By Mariya Manzhos

Eliza Anderson, Deseret News Purchase Image

Peterborough, N.H. — Arriving at the Nubanusit neighborhood is to step into a secluded haven hidden within the woods of rural New Hampshire. Wildflowers bloom around cedar-shingled homes topped with solar panels. There are no cars in sight, and life moves at a gentle pace, perfumed by the scents of cut grass and sugar maples. On a green lawn, children are running a mint iced tea stand; a resident strolls along a pathway between the homes, mug in hand; and another person emerges from a home to hand a Popsicle mold to a neighbor.

At the Nubanusit Neighborhood and Farm — or “Nubi” as residents call it — life is designed to unfold this way. In 2007, a group of developers passionate about sustainable living and community-based agriculture set out to turn 113 acres in Peterborough, New Hampshire into an eco-friendly neighborhood. Today, 29 households make up this cohousing community, a modern “co-living” model where residents own their homes and work regular jobs, but share and collectively care for the common spaces.

The 16 homes are clustered together and are interconnected by pedestrian pathways. The cars must be parked in a communal carport before entering the neighborhood. While everyone has their own kitchen, there are frequent potlucks and celebrations in the Common House. Everything feels carefully designed to instill a sense of connection and neighborliness into the daily life inside the community.

“I do think it’s countercultural, because we grew up in an individualistic country,” said Angela Pape, who has lived in the neighborhood for four years with her husband and three children. “So to have a bunch of people who grew up in an individualistic culture come together — you sometimes have to put your personal priority aside.”

It’s not always a blissful utopia, Pape and other residents told me during a recent visit. Over the years, community members have disagreed over the logistics of running the farm, where to direct their monthly dues, and most recently, whether to take down an ailing tree in the public area. Any decision that affects the community requires the group to reach consensus.

“To be successful at cohousing, you have to be able to forgive and try your best to let go of certain things,” Pape said. “Because at times, you’re bound to disagree with somebody.”

Cohousing in the U.S.

The concept of cohousing originated in Denmark in the late 1960s as a response to the desire for more community-oriented living arrangements. Danish architect Jan Gudmand-

Høyer and others began envisioning housing that balanced the privacy of individual homes with the benefits of shared spaces and communal activities. This led to the creation of the first modern cohousing communities. While “intentional community” is a broad term for groups living together based on shared values, a cohousing community specifically involves private homes with shared communal spaces and a focus on fostering close-knit relationships.

By the late 1980s, cohousing had reached the United States and in 1991, the first American cohousing community, Muir Commons, was established in Davis, California. Since then, the model has expanded across the country — there are about 180 cohousing communities across the United States, including the Wasatch Commons community in Salt Lake City, which comprises 26 clustered townhouses, both owned and rented by residents.

The Nubanusit Neighborhood & Farm in Peterborough, N.H., was formed with a vision of creating a sustainable community that integrates farming with a neighborhood lifestyle. | Mariya Manzhos

Interest in cohousing neighborhoods continues to grow from all ages, according to Kathryn McCamant, co-designer of the first U.S. cohousing community in California and president of CoHousing Solutions. She’s currently working with 17 different communities — urban and agrivillages, young families and retirees — in all phases of forming these communities.

“We clearly need options for creating community in our day-to-day lives as levels of loneliness continue to increase at all age ranges,” McCamant said in an email. “If you can meet neighbors a stroller ride away, rather than having to get you and the kid (and the dog?) in a car to get together, just that lessens the family stress and creates more satisfying connection.”

“People have always lived in some form of communities; we need to remake how we do that locally, tied to proximity,” McCamant said. “Cohousing has shown one way we can do that.”

Everyone is asked to join a team, such as events and activities, equipment or finance. “It’s really the sense of do what you can, contribute what you can,” said Melissa Maurer, who moved to Nubanusit in 2009 from another cohousing community in Michigan, and currently serves as the lead for the membership team.

Sometimes ideas of what’s best for the community diverge. Most recently, the disagreements revolved around a 200-year-old sugar maple tree in one of the public areas. The dying tree should be taken down for safety reasons, one group believed, while others wanted to save the tree. The decision was delegated to one of the teams, which made the decision to take down the tree. “As humans sharing responsibility for this big place, you know situations come up and we need to find solutions together,” said Maurer.

When I visited the community, the residents were gearing up for a “tomato dinner,” where everyone would contribute a dish made from tomatoes from the five-acre farm. The residents work with farmers who take care of the farm under a land-use agreement, and they contribute monthly association dues that cover equipment maintenance and other shared expenses like heat and hot water, plowing, and building and grounds. (The dues are based on the square footage of each unit and range from about $250 to $650 for the largest 2656-square-feet unit.) They have bought a tractor and greenhouses, and many

members purchase shares in the CSA (community supported agriculture). Residents help raise chickens and other animals for meat production.
Susan Fallon, another resident, has wondered about what anchors the community, noting that religion has historically been a unifying factor for many intentional communities. "I'm wondering if the farm is our anchor," said Fallon, whose mother's lineage traces back to Philo Johnson, an early member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. "Because I'm not sure what our anchor is sometimes."
It's through the sometimes hard conversations over stewardship that the community finds a way forward, according to Peter Orbeton. "It's the distinction between caring and caregiving," said Orbeton, who's lived in the community for 15 years. "And what that means is participating in those conversations."

It takes a village

It's families with children who seem to benefit from Nubanusit's neighborliness the most. While living in an urban neighborhood in Boston, Pape said she spent a lot of time scheduling playdates for her kids. She'd text a parent to ask for a playdate to hear back that "maybe once in three months they'd have an opening on Saturday at 2 o'clock," she told me. Here, no logistical choreography is necessary. That morning, Pape's 4-year-old son woke up and went over to a neighbor's house to play.
With another mom, Pape went on a walk to talk about their differences in parenting approaches in order to help their kids get along. "There was a commitment to: how can our households and our children have a functioning family relationship?" Pape said.

The Nubanusit Neighborhood & Farm in Peterborough, New Hampshire was formed with a vision of creating a sustainable community that integrates farming with a neighborhood lifestyle. | Mariya Manzhos

The community also engenders adult friendships. Being on the "equipment" team has helped Pape's husband make male friends, something she said he'd been missing for years. "If we lived in some isolated suburban neighborhood, he wouldn't have those two hours once a month that he talks to the men about what's going on in his life," she said.
And older residents view living around children as a perk. When Jean Foster was working in her garden recently, a 4-year-old who was walking by asked Foster if he could help. So she invited him to pick cherry tomatoes and taught him to find cucumbers hiding under the leaves. "I think being around young people keeps you younger," Foster said. Another resident said: "I don't have any hope of having my own grandchildren, but here I can share my love of horses with some of the kids and with others, just be a supportive 'grandma.'"
Aging at home is something that Foster has thought about while deciding on moving to the community from her prior residence in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She now lives in a first-floor unit without stairs; the doors are wide enough for a wheelchair if needed.
In the strident political situation today, Maurer said, she hopes to create more joy wherever she lives: "As we live together, discuss things, solve problems, I hope we could bring more joyfulness into the equation."

An Historic Convergence of Intentional Communities

September 23, 2024
by Daniel Greenberg, Foundation for Intentional Community (FIC) Co-Director

Convergence a success!

From Sept 2-3, the FIC and Twin Oaks co-facilitated an historic Convergence of Intentional Communities following their annual Twin Oaks Communities Conference. More than 222 participants attended across the two events (plus several dozen Twin Oakers and other local communards), and the FIC and the Twin Oaks fire relief fund split about $2K from the glorious return of Harvey Baker as auctioneer.
At the convergence, over 50 communitarians from all over North America (and a few from abroad) deeply asked ourselves:

- "Who will we need to be as the poly crisis deepens?"
- "How will we get from here to there?"

Convergence of Intentional Communities – Day One
Firstly, we began by exploring our identity as individuals within communities within a larger movement towards a more meaningful, regenerative, and just future. After a lively discussion on needs and offers, a number of bilateral linkages were created and themes were selected that impact our full networks.

Convergence of Intentional Communities – Day Two
The second day was devoted to fleshing out the scope and focus of a dozen working groups. Some were in areas the FIC can directly support such as courses, networking, membership, and a resource library. In addition, those interested in consultancy and research will reach out to other networks and organizations already working in these areas—GEN and the Communal Studies Association, for instance.
Furthermore, the remaining six working groups aim to further support our growing community of communities in several key areas. These include:

- exchanges of people and resources
- bioregional, national, and transnational gatherings
- a harm reduction and repair council
- regenerative business opportunities
- resiliency planning
- and lastly, tech tools to make this all possible (we jumped into Discord, but are also exploring other platforms such as Hylo).

Where next?
Overall, engagement and enthusiasm ran high as each group identified roles (including an internal steward and a liaison to a "hub") timelines, linkages with other groups, and resources needed to manifest their vision. Now, our task will be to continue herding all these cats while weaving these initiatives with existing projects and networks.
It's all very exciting and emergent!
Are you interested in joining one or more working groups and/or have other ideas for how we can build more solidarity and support within the intentional communities movement? If so, please complete this form to share your thoughts. Thanks, and we're excited to work together for a better future!

Intentional Community: The Fantasy and the Reality

I hoped to find meaning, purpose, and relationship in an intentional community. The strongest impediment, I discovered, was myself.

By Ben Cribbin
May 6, 2024
The Plough – The Bruderhof

"The important thing is that we are not alone," said Emmanuel, a long-term community member, as we contemplated the prospect of yet another Covid lockdown. It was December 2021, and there were thirty of us in a circle at the weekly volunteer meeting at an intentional community at the end of a dirt road in a tiny hamlet in Lower Saxony, Germany. We had drifted here from around the world, wandering free spirits who believed we were looking for community. As Omicron swept across Europe and many in the world outside faced another winter of loneliness trapped in cramped apartments, we contemplated our blessings: fulfilling work feeding animals, wholesome organic food, and acres of silent pine forest where you didn't meet another soul.

Most importantly, we had each other.

I lived in Michaelshof Sammatz for almost two years. For some time before I arrived, the idea of community had taken on an almost mystical quality, the answer to the problems of isolation and meaninglessness that seem endemic in the West. During my time in Michaelshof Sammatz, I met dozens of young people who felt the same. I arrived full of high-minded ideals about what living in an intentional community would be like: we would live, eat, and work together as we formed soul friendships, fell in love, and discovered our unique purpose and vocation. I assumed that once I arrived my life would begin and the path I should take would be laid out clearly before me.

By the time I left in May 2023, I had tasted something of the complex, messy, unsatisfactory – yet enigmatic and sometimes beautiful – reality that is community.

Michaelshof Sammatz was not the first closely-knit community I had experienced, nor the first I had abandoned. When I was twenty-four, I decided I was done with church. Not with the faith but with some of Evangelical Christianity's doctrines, like the belief that the Bible is the inerrant and infallible word of God or that Jesus needed to die on the cross to take the punishment for sin. The popular term for this experience is deconstruction, the gradual dismantling of many of the pillars of one's belief. In my naivety and loneliness I assumed no one in my church would be able to share my experience, let alone understand me, and so I quit. I set out from what I considered the decaying mansion of Christianity into what I assumed would be the untamed wilderness of a more fulfilling spirituality.

I was living alone in Paris at the time, so leaving church didn't work wonders for my social situation. In some ways I am a typical millennial. I left my hometown of Guildford, England, after I finished university, and with it the fertile soil of several long-standing communities: my extended family, circle of friends, and church.

Lacking the commitments and friendships I'd had back home, I spent my evenings wandering the quieter streets of Paris and got to know those streets very well.
I'd left church behind, but not the spiritual life or the vision of deepening my life and finding a calling. I even organized a few discussions on the subject of "spiritual community," to which quite a few people came. I had some sense that this kind of community, where we helped each other to grow, was what I should pay attention to at that point of my life. It almost had the weight of a vocation.
I logged on to *workaway.com* and typed "community" and "Germany" into the search bar. Up popped a community in Lower Saxony called Michaelshof Sammatz. The profile page showed pictures of young volunteers beside a field of tilled earth, smiling and holding up a selection of vegetables as if they were trophies. I contacted the community and booked a two-week visit in August.
Looking back, those two weeks were like being love-bombed. My psychological defenses weren't prepared for that much attention, that much validation, that much laughter. I'd never had that many friends, and never felt so deeply part of a tribe. My fellow volunteers and I threw ourselves into the work – gathering raspberry leaves to be made into tea, milking the cows, building a youth hostel to host the ever-increasing number of volunteers. There was an energy in the community, a mad frenetic spirit as new projects were begun and sometimes abandoned, and it seemed as if everyone was willing to give themselves wholeheartedly to the work. It was as different from my isolated, aimless life in Paris as I could imagine.
Four years later, in August 2021, I quit my job and moved to live there.
I wasn't aware of it at the time, but I was part of a significant migration of millennials to alternative communities during the last decade. In the United States, the number of communities registered with the Federation for Intentional Communities (FIC) doubled to 1,200 between 2010 and 2016. The FIC estimates that there are now between 10,000 and 30,000 across the world. In the United Kingdom, established communities like Findhorn and Bergholt Hall reported fielding hundreds of applications from prospective members every month during the pandemic. During my time at Michaelshof Sammatz, I got to know around a hundred such young people who had, for various reasons, decided to live in an intentional community.

I believe that, at heart, my fellow community seekers and I were searching for connection. In 2017, the Norwegian institute of public health published a paper studying intentional communities in North America. It concluded that life in an intentional community "appears to offer a life less in discord with the nature of being human compared to mainstream society." The report hypothesized why that might be: "One, social connections; two, sense of meaning; and three, closeness to nature."
Looking back, those two weeks were like being love-bombed. My psychological defenses weren't prepared for that much attention, that much validation, that much laughter.

Michaelshof Sammatz seemed to offer all this. As well as offering us the chance to spend time outside, and live closely with over one hundred and fifty other people, the community was, for many of its members, a model for how humans should live. The original members had been drawn together by a shared interest in the writings of Austrian esotericist Rudolf Steiner and his vision for organic farming communities that could offer an alternative to large-scale industrial farming and mass urban populations.

After almost two years, I decided to move on from Michaelshof Sammatz. Quite naturally, the bloom of first love faded and I began to appreciate the mundane reality of committing to the same place, the same work, and the same people every day. The community members were incredibly generous, welcoming me and many volunteers into their home, but I sensed that at a certain point I needed to make a decision – to stay long-term and work for the good of the community, perhaps forsaking a career and financial stability. I wasn't prepared to do that. The strongest impediment to community, at this stage of life, was myself.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" a friend asked me after I'd returned home. That's a question I'm still asking myself. Did I experience the enchantment of community I had set out looking for all those years ago?

In flashes, perhaps. I learned that there is nothing necessarily magical about a living arrangement called "an intentional community." It is simply a group of people who live together, perhaps sharing meals, work, lodging, and childcare. It might be authoritarian, rigid, and cultish, or it might descend into factions and infighting. If you're seeking meaning, deeper relationships, and connection to nature, you won't necessarily find them in an intentional community or in any living arrangement, conventional or otherwise. As my Christian upbringing reminds me, sin is not principally a problem of social organization but of the heart.

In his book *The Different Drum*, psychiatrist M. Scott Peck describes what he calls "genuine community." It's characterized by spontaneity and laughter, its members seeming to genuinely enjoy each other's company. Every voice and every perspective is heard, and its members work through conflict, rather than pushing it underground or allowing an authoritarian leader to maintain a semblance of peace by exerting control. You'll know this community, Peck writes, when you see it. Or, perhaps, when you experience it.

I learned that there is nothing necessarily magical about a living arrangement called "an intentional community." It is simply a group of people who live together, perhaps sharing meals, work, lodging, and childcare.

But, he continues, this kind of community is only achieved through emptiness. Each member needs to be emptied of everything inside them that keeps them from forming community: their solutions, their cherished theories, their need to fix others, and their absolute thirst to stay in control. Once a community experiences this emptiness, Peck writes, "a soft quietness descends." An "extraordinary amount of healing and converting begins to occur – now that no one is trying to heal or convert." Based on what I have experienced so far of community and myself, I too am convinced that this is the path to genuine community.

I still hope to discover that genuine community I set out to find years ago. All those young people forsaking the rat race in search of community are on to something: there is something terribly isolating about modern life. However, I've learned that if we find such community it won't be "out there" with some imaginary group of people we might one day meet, but among the people we actually live with, and with whom we have made a real commitment.

The Eternal Pendulum Swings of Life

by Leon Tsao
Ganas Community (Ganas Newsletter – 30-08-24)

Around a spiral I go, on the way to perfecting my soul
Until I realize, the spiral's purpose is not as straightforward as I thought The reason for its rounded shape is not to take me to a perfect place But it is to create a form akin to the shape of a Question Mark

Each round around, I realize I never get to The Answer Each round around, brings me more questions
Each round around, I grow impatient
Until each round around, I learn patience
Until each round around, I learn the value of mystery...

And yet, upon thinking I learned this lesson,
I am still taken in for another round.
I want to sigh and shout, "Enough, I had learned already!"
But Life keeps bringing on its eternal pendulum swings
As if to taunt me, saying, "But have you really learned?"

I can feel like I am never learning, the rounds never-ending Until I saw that, so long as I am going around
I am always learning, and always had been—
Not in a way that scratches the itch of Knowing Truth
Not in line with the stubborn narrow way of the Mind
With its love of finality and rewards...

Even when I tell myself I had learned this lesson, Another round of the spiral comes, and yet another—
I never get my reward of peace at the end, it seems
I will never know how my life truly comes together
Or the real meaning of it
No matter how eager I am to know
Or how patient I become in not knowing...

Another series of rounds of the spiral comes along,
But over time, I am becoming one with its continuous Swing By breathing slowly, in and out, upon each round,
Navigating that little bit of the present I have control over
Directing it like a point of a needle in creating a tapestry of a lifetime, While letting go of the rest—

Which means letting go
of any Answers, any straight lines to a final point,
of having to have a better, more peaceful future Where I can finally feel at home
And I can notice, by doing this,
How in the moment I feel a little better
That I can find a little peace
And discover a little Home within.

Why communal living can make us happier

30 April 2024
Matilda Welin
https://www.bbc.com/culture

As the cost of living rises and loneliness becomes a global concern, "intentional communites" are increasingly popular. We meet co-living members to explore the pros and cons.

Living with strangers? Always-occupied toilets, unwashed dishes in the kitchen, and people playing loud music in the room next to yours when you're trying to sleep? Maybe it doesn't have to be that way. As housing and rental costs remain high, and after the World Health Organisation has declared loneliness a global health concern, communal living is gaining media attention and community-led living arrangements are increasing. Maybe making a home with others is more good than bad. The question is if society is ready.

Rosie Kellett is a food writer who lives communally with six others in a converted industrial building in east London (Credit: Benedikte Kluver)

Rosie Kellett, 30, is a food writer based in London. In 2020, she needed a new place to live after a breakup, and on social media spotted a warehouse – an old industrial building – with availability. Kellett estimates that in Hackney Wick, where she lives, there are close to 100 different warehouses communities. But the one she lives in is not like the others. "We're set up a little differently," she says.

> We try to do [house meetings] as regularly as possible so that if anyone's unhappy with their chores, that doesn't fester – Rosie Kellett.

Kellett lives with six other people in their late 20s and early 30s. Every week, they each put £25 into a shared bank account to cover the cost of household and cooking materials, bin bags, cleaning products and everyone's dinner. Every night, one person cooks. On a shared group chat, people confirm if they'll be in for dinner, if they want a late plate saved for when they come home, or if they are bringing a guest.

There are house chores – and house meetings. "It takes multiple WhatsApp polls to get a window of half an hour when everyone's in," Kellett tells the BBC, "but we try to do them as regularly as possible so that if anyone's unhappy with their chores, or if there's anything anyone wants to discuss, that doesn't fester".

The best thing about living communally, she says, is that there's always someone around. The housemates feel like a family. "I've never felt that way, really, about people I've lived with before." In London, she adds, the housing crises makes it very hard to find a home. "I think it's becoming increasingly difficult to live a good life here... this for me is like we've gotten through the little crack in the system."

There are drawbacks, too. Kellett has to work hard to ensure she gets some me time. "I can find it quite difficult to tear myself away from a big table full of people," she

says. And even if you opt out of a party, you will still hear it. There are two showers and two toilets, which the housemates share without too much problem, but one washing machine isn't quite enough."

People living in the communal warehouse tend to stay for a few years. Other communal living spaces, though, are set up for more permanent living. Creal Zearing, 36, lives with her husband and three-year-old daughter in a co-house community in Madison, Wisconsin in the US.

"My husband bought the first unit that we lived in. He started looking after we'd been dating for, like, three months," Zearing tells the BBC. "I knew what co-housing was, and I was like, this is cool. If we stay together I could end up really liking it. And sure enough, things have worked out between us."

At Arbco co-housing estate in Madison, Wisonsin, there are spacious communal areas (Credit: Creal Zearing)

The Arbco co-housing estate has two apartment blocks and a handful of single-family houses. Each unit has its own bedroom, bathroom and kitchen. Around 100 people live here, ranging from families with children to single older people.

"Technically, our co-house is a condominium association – legally, that's how it's structured," Zearing explains. "We own our house, but we pay a condo fee every month, and that helps subsidise the community spaces that we utilise, and covers some insurance on our house."

Residents put on meals every few weeks, and there are social events like a monthly singalong and parties. There is a member meeting every fortnight, and board and committee meetings, too. "I work full time," Zearing says. "But there are a bunch of people who are retired, and there's probably more regular stuff that they do together that I miss." Each resident is expected to contribute four hours of work a month.

"What I really, really value is that we have a great community of parents," Zearing says. "As a new mother I've been able to really lean on those parents for advice." She also loves how she can come home from work, tired, and simply take her daughter out into the backyard to play with other kids. Friends and company are readily available.

Not everything is straightforward, though. The co-house community just had a big meeting about participation. "Many of us who are actively engaged feel like they're doing all they can do. And yet you see some people who aren't presumably doing anything," Zearing says. "But there's a lot of invisible work that goes on." Her husband has been burnt a few times, after suggesting new ways of doing things, and meeting resistance.

'Intentional communities'

There is a wide spectrum of communal living setups in the Western world, and they have emerged for various reasons – in the UK, according to The Guardian, the Covid-19 pandemic contributed to the increase of interest in communal living. The members of one successful communal-living centre in Suffolk told the BBC in 2023 that their set-up was helping to protect them from the cost-of-living crisis.

"It can be really confusing," says Penny Clark, who is on the board of community-living organisation Diggers and Dreamers, and specialises in "intentional communities" – homes where, according to the academic definition, five or more unrelated people live voluntarily together. In co-housing, people have their own self-contained homes as well as dedicated communal spaces, and the community is self-managed, she explains, whereas in housing co-ops, the ownership is shared – but the estate doesn't always feel like an intentional community.

There is also the relatively new sector of co-living, for which Clark consults as part of Conscious Coliving. Here, a company creates a building with self-contained apartments or studios as well as common areas, but these are not intentional communities either. "And then, very rare in the UK these days, are communes. According to academic definitions, what makes a commune particularly different to other types of community is that there's a high degree of income sharing. Your earnings go into the pot and you just spend things together."

Dr Penny Clark. Shared living and sustainability researcher amd Co-founder of Conscious *Coliving*.

What about Kellett's warehouse or those living in close-knit house shares, with people they consider close friends or even family? They can count as intentional communities, Clark says; they may just be less organised and more organic since they have fewer members.

More people may be turning towards communal living because the housing market is so pressured, Clark says. Some seek it out because they want to be more environmentally sustainable. And of course, in today's atomised society, where family members may be spread far and wide from the town where they were born, social connection is a big draw. In fact, research shows that people who live in intentional communities have a quality of life as high as the happiest people in society.

Is this way of living for everyone? "There's definitely compromises," says Clark. "The work that goes into community life can be a bit overwhelming – sometimes it turns out very badly, and people leave very upset."

It is also difficult to create a new co-housing community. It's hard to find land, the financial risks are big, and banks are hesitant to lend money. "We're in a system that has certain assumptions about what a good life is, and a good home. And communal living doesn't fit into those assumptions", Clark says. "In society we have this mindset that privacy is good, and that owning things is good." Sharing your living space, she says, is not aspirational. "The idea of a good home is a big house that you own by yourself."

Findhorn, Scotland

On Scotland's sandy beach near the city of Moray
countless pilgrims have gravitated
to the charms of Findhorn's commune and gardening.

In that sand they grew such incredibly huge vegetables
while letting their minds and spirit meditate
and seek to commune with nature's mystical powers.

It is where they claim to have contact
the deity known as Pan
then entering into a strange and spellbound communion
as their farming community grew in appeal
with its special charms and sense of serenity.

Do they really have some peculiar rituals
where they dance at dark to solicit the presence
of some ancient deity?

Is that sense of peace they claim abounds
truly the foundation for amazing visions
or other profound touches
by a realm so full of superstition.

To the residents who dwell
among its trees and foliage
they all claim to thrive
upon all the magic the place exudes,
be it from some mythical divine source,
which some would credit
what is evident unto those
who have visited its location
becomes expressed in those serene smiles.

They leave the rest of us to wonder
should the time ever come
would we too find that same tranquility
during a visit.
Only those who make the journey
will ever say for sure.

William Robbins

Fault Lines

Little Communes Everywhere

What parents might learn from radical movements.

By Jay Caspian Kang
May 31, 2024
The New Yorker

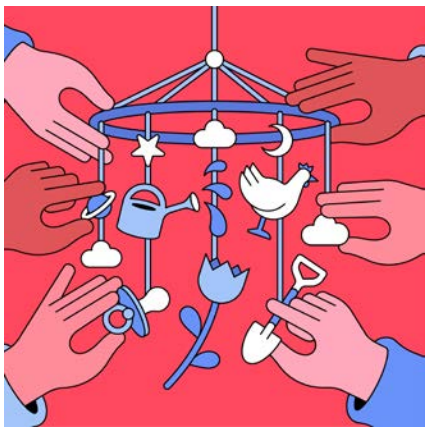


Illustration by Till Lauer

About ten years ago, during a particularly dull stretch of my life, I began kicking around the idea of starting a commune for disgruntled, disaffected, and broke media professionals. We would call ourselves the Kang Dropout Commune, and we would live on abundant acreage, in some cheap, dusty part of California, where we would dig irrigation ditches, raise chickens, and foster increasingly strange political and religious beliefs. I was joking, but not entirely—a part of me has always wanted to exit society and spend my days feeding goats among a coterie of like-minded individuals. Unfortunately, I am an irritable person who does not deal well with physical discomfort or neighborly annoyances; I am sure that I would get kicked out of my own commune, rightfully, within a matter of months. The other problem was that I could never figure out what the politics of the commune, its raison d'être, should be. Is dissatisfaction with modern life enough to bond a community? And, if we did not have more to go on than that, would we really be a commune, or would we just be ten or twelve roommates who happened to live about fifteen miles outside of Modesto? Then I had kids, and the idea of communal living went from an idle and mostly ironic fantasy into something that actually made much more sense.

In last week's column, I wrote about middle- and upper-middle-class parents vying for competitive spots in summer camps for their children. That piece sprang from a sense of alienation that I've detected among my parent group, one that I feel myself. We are mostly in our forties, which means that our adulthoods have been marked by 9/11, the 2008 market crash, and the pandemic. Granted, one can look at any stretch of forty or so years in American history, find three or four bad things that happened, and use them to sympathetically pathologize a generation. But people who began their adult lives in the wake of September 11th and the Great Recession generally have less optimism about the country's future than their parents had. If the election of Barack Obama provided temporary relief for liberals, this was undone by the rise of Donald Trump. We worry about our children inheriting a world on fire as a result of climate change and riven by political polarization and inequality, and we feel as though we are mostly alone in having to prepare them for it.

I was thinking about all this while I read "The Commune Form: The Transformation of Everyday Life," a forthcoming book by the comparative-literature professor Kristin Ross. Ross—who has previously written about the Paris Commune of 1871 and France's student uprising of May, 1968—focusses particularly on the ZAD de Notre-Dame-des-Landes, a thousand-acre commune created by French farmers and their allies in the late two-thousands, in an effort to block the construction of a new airport, which would have kicked many people off their own land. (The French government had designated the land

a zone d'aménagement différé, or a "deferred development area"; the farmers kept the acronym but used it to mean zone à défendre, or "zone to defend.") For a commune to work, Ross argues, one must have both a physical space to defend against an antagonist and an articulated vision for an alternative organization of human relationships and economy. The "commune form," as she defines it, is a "political movement that is also the collective elaboration of a desired way of life—the means becoming the end." Theory, in other words, needs to be put into practice, in an intimate and earnest setting, so that people can test out their ideas about living within the context of an actual place among actual people.

Ross identifies one of the motivating forces behind the creation of the ZAD as alienation, which was "less the loss of some human essence than it was the loss of possibilities: the sense of blockages and impasses brought on by the destruction and fragmentation of the social tissue by capitalism." Drawing upon the work of the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, Ross refers to "the colonization of everyday life," each part of our day becoming dominated by economic reasoning. This, she writes, dispossesses us of "our dignity, our social life, our time, the sense of mastery over our lives, the beauty and health of our lived environment, and of the very possibility of working together to invent our future collectively." Under such conditions, the commune becomes the only alternative.

In her own travels to the ZAD, in 2016, Ross found a group of idealistic people who were "looking consciously for models that might help them sustain a life intentionally set adrift from the world organized by state and finance." They were living, she writes, in "a wild west construction-in-process, with all the bustle and mess and joy of collective building, the palpable sense of a world—physical dwellings as much as a space of collective social transformation and experimentation—coming into being." In this village of half-built structures and sprawling vegetable gardens, disputes were adjudicated by a committee called the Cycle of the Twelve, a dozen revolving people whose names were drawn monthly from a hat. Ross had come to the ZAD to give a talk, but soon found herself baling hay with the commune's residents and experiencing a "kind of intense and physically satisfying fatigue." It wasn't just the physical exertion, she explains; rather, it "had more to do with the social density and intensity brought on by the intermingling of labor and social interaction, especially for someone like me, used to spending much of my time by myself."

Ross, a career academic, acknowledges, with appropriate self-deprecation, that she might be falling a bit too hard for the charms of pastoral living—an uncharitable reader might be inclined to dismiss "The Commune Form" as "Marxist N.Y.U. professor bales hay once and writes book about it." But such a reductive reading would miss her larger point, about the hope that can be found in our most essential tasks, done together, for the greater good. As she writes, "everyday life may well be the site of alienation, but it is also the site of its undoing, the terrain for social change." The basic responsibilities that we have as part of a community, from the distribution of food to the negotiation of disagreements, become the proof that a different type of society can be formed.

A common complaint I hear among parents is that it's almost impossible to create a collective sense of anything. This gripe mostly centers on phones—parents don't want their kids to have them but feel powerless to put this prohibition into practice given the extreme social pressures that their children face. If their kids' friends are communicating

primarily via smartphones, parents fear that any phoneless child will be isolated. The only solution, it seems, is to offset these pressures with a countervailing social force. (The group Wait Until 8th, for instance, encourages parents to sign a pledge not to give their children smartphones before the end of eighth grade.) The problem, as noted by Jessica Winter in a review of Jonathan Haidt's recent book, "The Anxious Generation," is that parents these days have little capacity for or faith in collective action. Children, after all, aren't the only ones who are isolated, anxious, and addicted to their phones—and we parents don't have anyone to take the devices out of our hands.

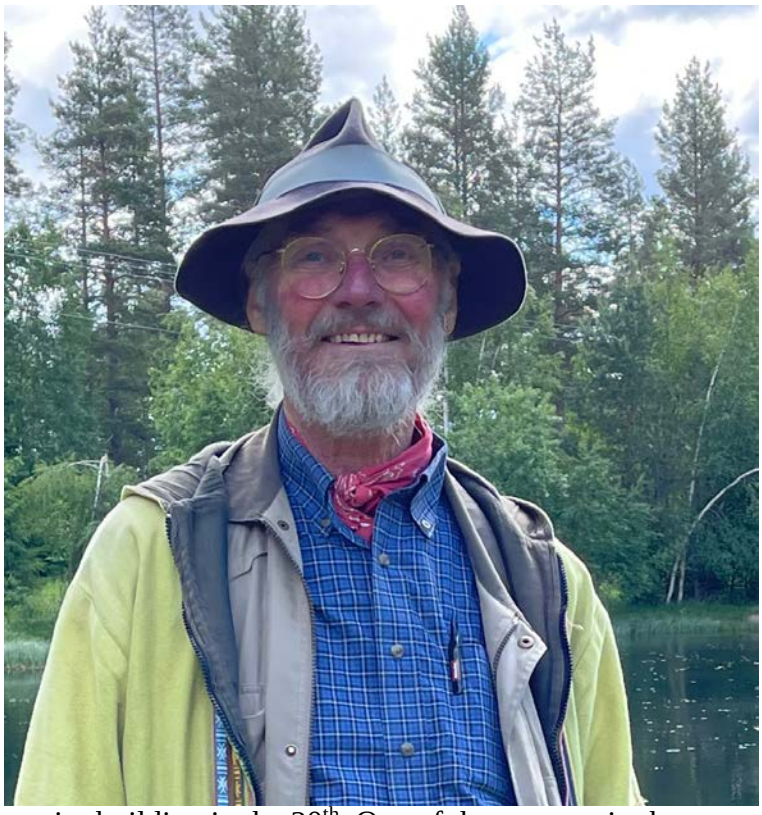
The irony of middle-class-parent alienation is that those same parents have, in some ways, never been more connected with one another, through group chats and e-mail chains and social media. (I have had four apps on my phone for youth sports leagues alone.) In recent years, these digital forums have been harnessed by middle-class parents as tools of political organization, and used, for instance, to defend exclusive admissions standards at magnet high schools across the country, to ban books from school libraries, and to eject elected officials from school boards. I don't think it's a coincidence that many of these fights are on behalf of essentially conservative causes. Many conservative parents feel as though their children are under constant threat, and they often see the government in a fundamentally antagonistic way. Even the faintest call to defend some tradition or another will bring them to the barricades. Middle-class parents who skew more progressive do not feel the same explicit political stakes in these fights, and seem more likely to associate collective action with issues of equity and social justice. (I suspect that part of the reason so much of the discussion around parenting among the liberal and suburban middle class has focussed on phones and screen time is that these parents don't feel particularly connected to the culture wars that hover around their children's schools.) One can—and maybe even should—roll one's eyes at this particular alienation, but that doesn't exactly help with the alienation.

All of this may seem a far cry from French communes. But another thing I was thinking about as I read Ross's book was the nursery school that I attended four decades ago. There was a time in recent history when many American cities were dotted with vaguely socialist preschools and child-care coöperatives; some of these schools could trace their history to a group of faculty wives at the University of Chicago who, in 1916, founded a child-care coöperative to free up some of their time for Red Cross work. I attended a coöperative nursery school as a child, but, when it came time to send my daughter to a similar place, the price tag was close to three thousand dollars a month. A similar fate has met so many formerly communal spaces: civic recreational sports leagues replaced by competitive clubs, city pools replaced by prohibitively expensive swim centers, public schools supplemented with after-school tutoring. These are all physical spaces, and so many of them have been plundered by privatization and neglect. This is what happens when everyone just gets too busy to invest in the commons.

The majority of middle-class parents would never join a mildly demanding co-op, much less a commune, but there are still salient lessons in Ross's book, and ways to build and defend little communes everywhere. If parents want to feel less alienation—if they want, for example, to believe that it might actually be possible for families in their town to hold off on giving their kids phones until high school—they may need to return to the weird, quasi-communal spirit that animated American parenting, at least in certain corners, during various periods of the twentieth century. Physical spaces, whether pools or parks, can be reclaimed through collective action, in much the way that admissions policies at exclusive magnet schools can be protected by a small group of dedicated parents. Small, everyday victories are the only real cure for alienation. What else would work? ♦

Communal Studies in the future

By Jan Martin Bang



Intentional community has been a firm tradition within our western culture for about as long as we have written records. The first community we have documentation for was founded by Pythagoras in Italy around 530 BCE and reflected his ideas about the universe and humanity's position within it.

Since then, there have been many attempts at forming alternative communities. Christian monasticism, the Protestant tradition of intentional community, more recently a vigorous sprouting of communities associated with the industrialisation of the 19th century, and another growth of community building in the 20th. One of the patterns in these waves of intentional communities is that whenever mainstream western society is undergoing rapid change in the way we think and live, intentional community becomes a venue for testing out new theories of social intercourse.

Over the last 40 years, during the time that ICSA has been active, we have achieved a globalisation of society at many levels. A decade after the foundation of the ICSA, the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) was established to create a network of experimental intentional communities that would explore solutions to the existential challenges facing us.

The nature of academic enquiry has also been undergoing changes. From the idea of objective enquiry into observable phenomena to a more interactive relationship between the observer and the observed. This new paradigm added another dimension of thought, especially in the social sciences, and gave rise to the idea of participatory enquiry. We may discern this in the opening up of the ICSA to the experiential and participatory conferences in the last 20 years, mostly held in living intentional communities.

Today ICSA has the opportunity of playing a key role in being one of the few established networks where researchers can come together and share their ideas and findings. At a time when the planet is threatened by global problems caused by our lifestyles, we need to experiment with new types of living. Alternative communities have done this through the centuries, and have come up with many creative solutions. They continue to do this even today, and we need more than ever to look at these solutions and publicise the ones that are successful.