





# Finding Community

By Monika Carless

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The first seeds of communal living were planted in my consciousness many years ago on a trip through Kentucky, where quite by accident I happened upon the historic landmark of Shakertown at Pleasant Hill. The museum was deserted; I was free to wander the settlement in quiet contemplation. As an immigrant to the New World myself, I was fascinated by the pioneer spirit that populated Canada and the United States and, at the same time, mournful for the aboriginal culture destroyed in the process.

As I explored that day, I thought about sustainability in terms of land use, cultural and societal structures and, most importantly, honoring each culture for its uniqueness and contribution to the human condition. I suppose that I am not the only one to idealistically dream of a Utopian society, where one could live in complete co-operative happiness with others of the same mind set. Communism, as it were, had quite the bad rap in my young mind, because I only understood it from the view point of European post war depravities, and rarely made the connection that things held in common was the ideal on which communism in the political sense was based.

The words and phrases like “kibbutz,” “intentional community,” “back to the land,” “co-operative society,” “food with a conscience,” even “hippie” and “tree hugger,” all rumbled around in my head as parts of an idea that would brew for more than twenty years as my life experience deepened. Sharing work, the fruits of one’s labor, meals cooked by many hands,

friends picking mushrooms and drying them for a winter’s meal, sheep grazing on common land – those all seemed like perfect solutions to a fragmented society.

However, those very thoughts ran in perfect opposition to my need for solitude and self-rule. I had my copy of *Walden Pond* for those days when I was sure living in the Community of One was the only way I could survive the modern world, and the Findhorn Garden book for the days when I longed for the feeling I had experienced when exploring Pleasant Hill. How to marry the two?

When I visited the Findhorn Community in Scotland, I realized that I could easily live the communal life except on the days when I knew I would long for an escape, not to mention that my partner’s life plan did not include living there. Inspired but frustrated, I struggled between the ideal and the reality. I was most attracted to an ecovillage, where the focus would be honoring the earth and its resources, including the human resource.

An ecovillage looks at self-sustainability within energy production and usage, growing food, maintaining ecological/permaculture principles, income streams from communal efforts, and of course paying close attention to the soul needs of each member. Soul needs could include a lending library, a live music café (for members and visitors alike), an orchard (for food, income and a place to build a healing labyrinth), a meditation hut, a fire pit for ceremonies, an art studio, a daycare, etc.

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Houses fashioned from recycled whiskey barrels at the Findhorn ecovillage community in Scotland.

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## Types of Communities

Most communities form around a common vision but can vary in structure.

**Ecovillage:** Usually focusing on ecological/sustainable principles. May feature permaculture/organics/bio-dynamics and spiritual beliefs based on honoring the Earth. May offer workshops, CSA (community based agriculture schemes), or work holidays and day visits. Some examples are the Ecovillage at Ithaca, New York; Findhorn Community in Scotland; Sieben Linden in Germany, which hosts Ecovillage Design Education.

**Commune/Intentional Community:** Most likely to be rural, but can be urban-based. A sharing of property, meals, joint businesses, and housing or the land may be shared and the housing individual to each family or couple. Many famous communes existed around the turn of the century, and during the sixties and seventies when the back-to-the-land movement was very strong. Examples are Twin Oaks, Louisa, Virginia; The Farm, Tennessee; Morningglory, Killaloe, Ontario.

**Co-Housing:** Individually owned homes with communally shared facilities such as garden, orchard, day care, outdoor kitchen, workshop, common green or even a café run by residents. Examples are Terra Firma in Ottawa, Ontario; WindSong in Vancouver, British Columbia; WildSage in Boulder, Colorado.

**Co-op House:** Individuals or families share one house, with common areas such as kitchen, living room, garden, or each family has its own living space entirely but share garden, laundry facility, outdoor chores, with one common living area in the attic or lower level for communal activities. Look for co-housing opportunities in newspaper and magazine ads, or at your local café, health food store, or put up your own ad!

I participated in local discussions about forming an intentional community, but they came to a halt with problems in acquiring planning permission for a multi-home, multi-building site. However, the desire for moving towards co-operative living is strong in the area where I live.

My partner calls my struggle with long-term communal living my ego. I have to admit that, while the ideal sounds wonderful, the reality of my personality is that I want to do things my own way most of the time. And being a modern day gypsy, I could not promise that I would not desert the project halfway through.

Being brutally honest with myself about this struggle helped me to find a solution that works for us as a family. The very broad spectrum of living communally is, of course, any functioning town, city or area, with residents sharing roads,

public spaces, work, and buildings. But this approach is much too broad for me, even with volunteer involvement in community issues. I felt the need for something a bit more tailored. My thinking had to shift, from the traditional understanding of “commune,” to something that would be practical for me while still holding the essence of that idea. How could I live the lifestyle while staying true to my nature? How to live permanently in community, without too much compromise to my own needs? Was I not being committed enough to the ideal? Was I catering to my ego too much...why was this desire turning into guilty thoughts of wanting it all?

A winter’s visit with friends from another nearby village offered a lively discussion about common goals. Sitting by a warming fire, we discussed how we could possibly create a two-family commune when more than two families seemed daunting. We agreed on organics, permaculture, bio-dynamics, friendship, sharing, and the value of shared work schedules, and communal meals. Our families had been friends for several years. We loved each other’s children, respected each other, and were used to frequent un-announced visits. One family loved to cook, the other loved to eat! So what could go wrong?

As discussions progressed, we discovered that we would have to make allowances for work style differences and things like personal views on vacation time. What seemed important to one seemed unnecessary to the other, and so on. In addition, we weren’t sure how to find planning permission for our project and in the end, most importantly, we wondered what would happen to the project once our children were grown and wished for a different way of life. Who would buy whom out, whose children would want out first if all of the parents were gone, how would we provide for our children’s financial inheritance? Who would hold the mortgage, and would this become a source of power struggle in the future? Power imbalances are often a sore point in communal life, most of them rising from views of what labor is worth in contrast to financial contributions.

All discussions ended with knowing that we wanted the best

for everyone involved. The honesty of our discussions was already a step towards a more conscious way of living and so we took the best of our desires and moved on to a new plan. Car-Bokerville, as we named our effort, was a combination of our names and resources. We decided that we would maintain our own homesteads, approximately two acres in total, while sharing in raising vegetables and livestock. As much as we may be devoted to raising food, preserving it, baking and cooking it, it can be lonely; working together when it fit our schedules was our way of communing. We stay away from each other when we know we would be bad company, and find our way back when the time is right.

The Bokers raise beef (sharing land with another organic farmer) and meat chickens, while the Carless family raises sheep and turkeys. We each grow vegetables, with plans to expand an area for squash and potatoes to feed both families. Bill Boker built our barn and solar food dehydrator, and when the Bokers were done with their veggie stand, it became my yard shed in exchange for a piece of machinery. We share the rototiller, the lawn mower, freezer space, farming know-how, the harvest, and shoulders to cry on. Meals together are a special time, with music, dancing, and much laughter, while the broader community offers us a chance to work with others on their sustainability efforts. This arrangement satisfies my need for a co-operative lifestyle while leaving space for me to be me. Our arrangement works as long as we share in trust and tolerance of each other's quirks – a basic component of community building.

Visiting Findhorn sharpened my sense of the incredible human spirit that allows for living in an intentional community. Every meal shared, every task performed felt wonderfully cathartic and soul building in the short time I spent there. It awakened in me a passion for co-operative living and taught me what sacrifice to self/ego meant, while exposing the realities of the lifestyle. That I was not ready for it in the usual sense was a surprise to me. I thought I knew myself to be a good candidate simply because I believe in the principles. Instead, I learned that what inspires me and what I can commit to are two different things altogether.

Community feeds my soul needs in many ways. Now “held in common” means more than the physical reality; it suggests ways to hold ideas and things of the spirit together with others. It seems that in order to find balance, we tend to swing in one direction then completely in the other – a way of testing duality I suppose. Today's society has moved so far to the side of the fragmented experience, that it is not surprising to feel ourselves drawn into wanting to share our lives, homes, and experiences with others. My experience waxed and waned in a continuing cycle as I grew older. Starting with an extended family as a child, then craving autonomy and solitude as a young adult, then

Top photo: Author Monica Carless in her family's orchard.

Bottom photo: A solar food dryer is among the equipment shared by the Carless and Boker families as part of their experiment in cooperative sustainable living.



Photo by Jenn Murphy

awakening to thoughts of co-operative living – but with people I chose rather than those I was born to – then, facing my crone years, hoping for a cave to hermit in, and finally, a way to live in community that satisfies all my needs.

I have learned that community exists because we exist. Whether it is an intentional village with a specific focus such as spiritual beliefs, environmental or social activism, type of education or government, or two or more families sharing resources to affordably live on the land....or any area that we call home, community is a gathering of physical and spiritual resources. We can participate at either end of the spectrum, or somewhere in between. It is first a desire to live co-operatively, giving of ourselves and also recognizing where we need others to support us, then shifting to deeper manifestations of community building.

Mothers forming a child care group is community, as is people gathering to cook for a sick friend. Inviting elders from your native/aboriginal community for teachings on ancient wisdom and offering ceremonies for healing to both sides is community. Eating locally and seasonally, car-pooling, running a soup kitchen, showing environmental films, drumming circles, allotment gardens...all community.

While I still long for the experience of intentional communal living, it will have to be satisfied by visiting and volunteering at one or another community for now. Work vacations at such places can be deeply inspiring and restorative. Your own larger community can benefit greatly from ideas of sustainability and co-operation brought back from these experiences. Once I believed that living on a commune would be my escape from the rat race of the regular world. Gradually, I recognized the need for the ideals from intentional communities to be shared within society, so that living in my regular world would be my solace, and escape would not be necessary. The natural world, such as the eco-system of a forest, is a brilliant example of how individuals (such as the various trees, shrubs, grasses, fungi) can build a copacetic existence if the intention for that is present.

When I think of the Shaker village at Pleasant Hill or Findhorn now, I realize exactly what they taught me: Community is within me and how that manifests in my outer world is my life choice.

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The bee garden on the Carless property.

Photo by Monika Carless

## Learn More

*Surviving and Thriving on the Land* by Rebecca Laughton (Green Books, 2009)

*Finding Community: How to Join an Ecovillage or Intentional Community* by Diana Leafe Christian (New Society Publishers, 2007)

*Ecovillages: New Frontiers for Sustainability*, Schumacher Briefing No. 12 by Jonathan Dawson (Green Books, 2006)

*Creating Community Anywhere* by Carolyn R. Shaffer (CCC Press, 2005)

*Reinventing Community: Stories from the Walkways of Cohousing* by David Wann (Fulcrum Publishing, 2005)

*Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities* by Diana Leafe Christian (New Society Publishers, 2003)

*In Search of the Magic of Findhorn* by Karin Bogliolo, Carly Newfeld (Findhorn Press, 2002)

*Ecovillage Living: Restoring the Earth and Her People* by Hildur Jackson, Karen Svensson (Green Books, 2002)

*Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves* by Kathryn M. McCamant, Charles Durrett, Ellen Hertzman (Ten Speed Press, 1994)

*Communities Magazine* - [www.communities.ic.org](http://www.communities.ic.org)

*Natural Life Magazine* "Green Acres" ecovillage article: Nov/Dec, 2007

*Natural Life Magazine* Cohousing articles: May/June, 2008, Sept/Oct 2004

*Natural Life Magazine* "Living in Community" column by Helen Forsey: 1993 to 1995

Fellowship for Intentional Community - [www.fic.ic.org](http://www.fic.ic.org)

Cohousing Association - [www.cohousing.org](http://www.cohousing.org)

Global Ecovillage Network - [www.ecovillage.org](http://www.ecovillage.org)

Intentional Communities Directory - [www.directory.ic.org](http://www.directory.ic.org)