

## **'Lasting Lessons About Intentional Communities'**

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In this final chapter we identify and explore any lasting lessons from our research. What, if anything, can be learned from a study of intentional communities across a country which, for many, is thought of as lying at the end of the earth? Have these (usually small) communities scattered across this remote country anything to tell the rest of us? We think they do. What they have to tell us falls into three broad areas. Firstly, we have learned something about utopia--both the phenomenon of utopianism and the study of utopias. Secondly, we have learned important lessons about the study of intentional communities. And finally, our research sheds light on lessons that we can all share--these are lessons about living together.

### **Lasting Lessons for the Study of Utopia**

#### **1. Good place or no place?**

There exists within scholarship on utopias some tension between two interpretations of utopia. Both stem from the ambiguous etymology of the word. The scholarly Thomas More

created a neologism and phonetic pun that combines three Greek words: topos (place), eu (good) and ou (non, or not). This creates an eternal tension in the concept of utopia because utopias are at once good places and no places. And so one interpretation focuses on the concrete utopia--the idea that utopia is an aspiration, something to be pursued and realised. Another places utopia always just over the horizon.

There are many variations and nuances on these two interpretations and most scholars combine them in some way. However, they have serious implications. The former view is the more straightforward. It leads people to experiment, to found communities, to change their lifestyle and to try to make their dreams come true. This impulse can be traced in advertising (eat this cereal and get the body you've always wanted, buy this car and you will be sexually attractive to women); travel (come to New Zealand and realise your potential); and politics (vote for me and I will make the world a better place). This is what takes utopians forward.

Utopia as noplacelike is more complicated. On the one hand, this view informs anti-utopians, like Karl Popper, who believe that attempts to realise utopia will create an authoritarian or totalitarian world. This is informed by an idea of utopia as perfect. A perfect world, it follows, is unchallengable. There is no room for dissent in such a place. To dissent would be

irrational, mad, even, and so the dissenter would require treatment or elimination. Dystopias such as Zamyatin's *We* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* stem from this view. Our previous research has indicated that this view of utopia as perfection-seeking is a mistaken one (Sargent, 1994), (Goodwin, 1980), (Sargisson, 1996, 2000). Many contemporary scholars of utopia take a more nuanced view of utopia as the desire for something better, rather than something perfect (Levitas 1990; Moylan, 1986, 2000). This means that utopia remains just around the corner, just over the horizon. The utopian ship sails ever onwards.

The material and knowledge gained from this research supports a view of utopia as *both* the good place and the noplacel. Members of these communities often share a vision of the good life and are attempting to realise this in the here and now. However, the communities are not perfect. Their members view them as better than life in the mainstream, or life 'outside', not as utopia realised. It would probably be more accurate to describe them, as we do in Chapter Five, as utopias in process. Members feel that living collectively and exploring alternatives is better than remaining where they were. Often it is hard, physically, financially, emotionally and spiritually, but they say, it is worth the effort.

All the things I've ever wanted to do, things I'd hadn't even dreamed of really, are possible at Gricklegrass (Andrew, Gricklegrass, 06.01.01)

I think the most important thing has been to have the opportunity to try to live like this. I suppose looking at it from an outsider's point of view, it is actually a huge thing, to do something like this (Arafelle, Earthspirit 12.04.01).

## **2. Communitarianism and utopianism<sup>1</sup>**

Throughout this book we have used language that assumes that there is a connection between communitarianism and utopianism. The old labels *utopian* community and *utopian* experiment should not be forgotten, and a more recent usage, *practical utopia*, indicates that some believe that the utopian nature of intentional communities should be made explicit. The so-called utopian socialists Étienne Cabet (1788-1856), Charles Fourier (1772-1837), Robert Owen (1771-1858), and Charles Henri Saint-Simon (1760-1825) all had direct connections with the establishment of intentional communities, and in the twentieth century intentional communities were founded based directly on the utopian novels *Walden Two* (1948) by B.F. Skinner (1904-90), *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) by Robert A. Heinlein (1907-88), and *The Harrad Experiment* (1966) by Robert Rimmer (1917-

2001), among others. In the late nineteenth century, after the publication of *Looking Backward* (1888) by Edward Bellamy (1850-98), at least one community was founded based on Bellamy's novel, albeit over Bellamy's strenuous opposition. Also, in an article in 1989, Sargent showed that during the part of the nineteenth century when the establishment of intentional communities was at its peak in the US, the ideas put forth by their founders were generally paralleled by the ideas found in the utopian literature of the same period. Finally, in most cases the prospectus for an intentional society that was never founded is readily labelled a utopia, and fiction about intentional communities both actual and fictional is frequently listed among utopias.

Writers communicate their dreams by writing them down and publishing them; communards communicate their dreams by trying to put them into practice. All communities have constitutions, rules and regulations, and/or agreements (formal or informal) about how its members are to live their lives. Some of these agreements are not written down, but just as certain countries operate without written constitutions, the members most often understand the rules. If these documents and agreements had been fictions, we would call them utopias without question. In fact, most of them were fictions in the sense that they did not reflect any reality, even though that was not the intention of

their authors. The forms of expression were different, but one motivation was held in common--the desire to communicate a social dream, a eutopia.

One of the reasons for not seeing the connection between utopianism and communitarianism is based on a misunderstanding of utopianism. Overwhelmingly utopianism is what Sargent has called 'social dreaming', dreaming of or desiring a better life, a life that corrects the worst problems of the present. In most cases utopias do not suggest that every problem will be solved; most utopias, and probably *all* contemporary ones, recognize that while the worst problems can be identified and radically improved, perhaps even completely solved, issues will remain that will need to be dealt with through the processes of education, the law, and political decision making.

To a large degree utopias are thought experiments, 'as ifs', trying out better ways of living on paper, and that experimental character connects utopianism with communitarian experiments. And one of the clear messages of this book is that in this one small country, people are carrying out a remarkable range of such experiments. All of these communities are experiments attempting to create what the founders and members believe to be a better life, not, certainly, a perfect life, but definitely a better one than they had or could have outside the community, and having found a better life, they are trying to

make their communities even better, just as Oscar Wilde suggested utopians would.

## **Lasting Lessons for Studying Intentional Communities**

### **1. Concerning generalisations**

While research on intentional communities has evolved from earlier work that was either largely antiquarian reports on individual communities or travelogues reporting on visits to a number of communities, it is still rarely comparative. Some contemporary scholars, such as Bill Metcalf (Metcalf 1996) and Yosef Gorni et al (Gorni 1987) have studied communities in different countries but they make few comparisons. This is, perhaps, for good reason because, as our research has shown, those few generalised theories of intentional communities that do exist, such as Kanter's, are deeply flawed. Thus, while we say that our research contradicts much of the general understanding of communities, we base our statements on our wide reading in a literature that primarily focuses on individual communities.

We have found that communities are, in some respects, very much alike, so that comparison is possible, but we have also found that they differ profoundly, so that generalisations have to be made with great care. In questioning the assumptions that we believe are made and uncritically accepted and in making our own general observations based on our research, we hope to open

debate and discussion with our colleagues in the field of communal studies over what generalisations can and cannot be made about intentional communities.

Most studies of intentional communities are based on communities in the U.S., U.K., or Israel. We have shown conclusively that this is a mistake, that many of these generalisations are not universally applicable. While we now know that some of the best-known generalisations do not even fit the U.S. (for example, Kanter's), it is equally clear that there are significant national differences, at least between New Zealand and the U.S. (and between these countries and the U.K. and Israel). This suggests that scholars need to be very careful about generalising.

At the same time our study shows that most, if not all, intentional communities face common problems, ranging from the apparently trivial, like 'Do we allow dogs?' and 'Whose turn is it to clean up?' to the obviously fundamental, like 'What are our core principles?' We have also shown that there is no single answer to these questions; one size does not fit all. Nonetheless, the experience of communities can be useful to each other and we will explore this further in the final section of this chapter.

## **2. Classifying Communities**



A methodological point that became clear during the planning stage for this book was that existing categories for organising communities were not going to be useful in this case. Often, scholars have organised communities into such categories as religious/secular, urban/rural, in order to have a descriptive and analytical tool with which to work. We have done this ourselves. In his article 'Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited', Sargent developed a taxonomy that was more useful than most. It asked about religious orientation, location, intent regarding longevity, property holding, political system, sexual orientation, source and interpersonal orientation (Sargent, 1994). This is more complex than most taxonomies but even this did not form a useful basis for organising this research. Certainly, it asked questions we needed to answer and in order to begin to understand a community it is necessary to know these things. But it did not help us to explain the similarities and differences that cross these divides.

We opted then, for an approach that was based in the communities' understandings of their own aims. Why do they exist? What do they aim to achieve? What, in other words, is the utopia towards which members seek to move? The answers to these questions, we found, enabled us to develop the broad categories of religious and spiritual communities, co-operative communities and environmentalist communities. Within these categories we

found wide variations and our accounts represent these variations.

Working this way has allowed us to glean and share information required by a traditional taxonomy and to give a real feel of the similarities and differences between and amongst communities that share a broad aim. It has also permitted us to be alert to phenomena that cut across our categories, such as conflict and conflict management.

Methodologically, then the desire to sort, order and classify should, we feel, be tempered by the need to accurately reflect these communities for analytical discussion. Our categories are broad and fluid. Some communities, like Earthsong Eco-Neighbourhood and Tui Community, could be located in several places and we have tried to remain alert to this. No system of classification is ever going to fully represent reality and we feel it important to note this.

### **3. Measuring Success**

Anyone who regularly reads the scholarly literature on intentional communities will have frequently seen such communities labeled a 'success', or, less often, a 'failure'. Since the publication of *Commitment and Community* in 1972, the basis for such judgments has tended to be the sole measure of longevity, defined as twenty-five years. While Kanter's definition of success was actually more complex than this, and

no one would argue against the position that lasting for twenty-five years might be prima facie evidence of 'success', the twenty-five year measure has become a simplistic measure used to neatly divide intentional communities. Definitions of success were stated explicitly or implicitly in the classic studies of intentional communities prior to Kanter, and they generally used longevity in the sense that if the community no longer existed, it was judged a failure. Thus, Kanter's stress on longevity is part of a well-established tradition.

She justifies using longevity as a measure like this:

One central issue is whether longevity is a necessary or sufficient measure of a group's success. With respect to nineteenth-century utopian communities at least, longevity is a valid criterion of success, not only because it is easily measurable but also because for many communities in the nineteenth century their over-riding goal was simply to exist--to establish a social order embodying all their ideals and to make of it a viable, stable, and permanent organization. (127-28)

Kanter's project, as suggested by her title *Commitment and Community*, is to discover the commitment mechanisms that create community, and she could not have undertaken the project without a definition that focused on longevity.

But even as Kanter's book was being published, others developed more complicated definitions of success. In a 1972 essay Robert S. Fogarty discusses five criteria, including whether the members saw the community as a success and whether the community successful on its own terms. And after the tendency to use Kanter's one dimension was already apparent Jon Wagner (1985) developed seven possible measures, including Fogarty's and Kanter's. He provided a range of criteria that includes longevity but adds others that gives us a range of alternatives to consider. Wagner concludes that because it tries to apply a single measure to a multi-dimensional subject, we would be better off by dropping the concept of 'success' entirely.

Donald E. Pitzer (1989) has argued in his various essays on 'developmental communalism' that we need to understand communalism as a stage in a process with non-communal beginning and ending points. An intended corollary of his argument is that the measure of success should be applied to the whole movement rather than to the communal phase alone. Identifying communalism as a moment in a social movement is not particularly popular among believers in communalism as a solution to today's social problems, but Pitzer's argument clearly applies to the community that he has most studied, New Harmony, an immensely influential community that was a failure by almost any other measure.

Participants in a session on success at the 1993 meeting of the International Communal Studies Association suggested that we should ask the following questions:

To what extent do communities fulfill their own stated goals?

To what extent do communities fulfill the goals of the individual participants?

To what extent are communities capable of changing over time to adjust to the changed needs of the community and its members and to the outside?

To what extent do the goals and ideals of the community influence the larger society?

Some of the participants in the roundtable and members of the audience also argued that success and failure is simply the wrong subject. The subject should be the message that cooperation and community works for the members and that they provide preferable alternatives to competition. But, of course, as others pointed out, cooperation and community do not work for all the members; there are well-attested negative situations. Which raises the questions of whether we should consider a long-lived community that mistreats its members a success.

In a speech at the Ruskin Community, Henry Demarest Lloyd said,

Only within these communities has there been seen, in the wide borders of the United States, a social life where hunger and cold, prostitution, intemperance, poverty, slavery, crime, premature old age, and unnecessary mortality, panic and industrial terror have been abolished. If they had done this only for a year, they would have deserved to be called the only successful 'society' on this continent, and some of them are generations old. All this has not been done by saints in heaven, but on earth by average men and women (Qtd. in Fogarty 1990, 235).

In other words, if you have done this for only a year, you are a success.

#### **4. Concerning Homogeneity**

There is a view amongst people who think about intentional communities that in order to survive across time they need to contain like-minded people who are similar in important ways. We have found this not to be the case. It is true that these communities contain mostly (though not exclusively) white skinned people. However, they come from all over the world and most groups contain a mixture of cultures from, for instance, Spain, Germany, Britain and South America as well as Pakeha New Zealand. Some members have mixed ancestry (for example, Maori/Pakeha). Moreover, members are often strong-willed and

hold firm opinions. They may be like-minded in that they share a broad vision, but they do not all think in the same way.

Yes, and I don't think that differences are suppressed in any way in communities. They are very opinionated places, well Chippenham is, and it has strong opinions about everything! That's part of the beauty of it, that you can actually voice your opinions ... They don't think 'That person's absolutely hideous, listen to what they're saying, I don't like them anymore', it's not like that. People don't think that, it's more 'Why do you think that?' The conversation here is wonderful. It's great having opinions from everyone. You might talk something over and eventually everyone will come to the same conclusion. There are so many things that I hadn't previously thought of, and I can see that there is a lot of validity in that. I love conversations here (Fiona, Chippenham, 12.03.01).

Diversity of opinion--and the ability to express this freely--generates dynamic communities, and these places are certainly dynamic. We revisit this below.

### **Lasting Lessons for Living Together**

#### **1. Decisions need to be legitimate as well as mutually binding.**

Most of the communities that exist in New Zealand today are egalitarian. This excludes many of the religious communities but includes almost all of the secular ones. And nearly all of these

egalitarian communities use some form of consensus decision-making in their business meetings. At least one person interviewed from each of these communities cited consensus as their most valuable process.

### **What is consensus?**

Consensus decision making is not majority-based system, where discussion culminates in a vote. Votes, it is said, create winners and losers. Rather, consensus seeks agreement. Consensus decision-making aims to enable people to deal with and live with conflict, to negotiate disagreements and to find collective solutions. In the management-speak of the modern university, participants fully 'own' decisions made by consensus. It is a fully egalitarian process and this is why we say that it mirrors the intent of the communities.

### **Why is consensus appropriate for egalitarian groups?**

Consensus, we suggest, is the most appropriate way to make decisions in small egalitarian groups. When we say small, we include the larger groups of, say Anahata, and the Friends' Settlement, both of which were home to some thirty adults in 2001. It is appropriate for the following reasons: it mirrors the intent of the community and, as such, it is the most legitimate form of decision-making in this context. It effectively binds each individual to the decision and so it is the most effective form of making decisions in this context.



The wider world can learn a lot from intentional communities about how to make decisions by consensus. Like all democratic procedures, consensus is open to manipulation and abuse, and we have both seen it used to legitimise non-consensual decisions in the workplace. But done right, consensus is a marvelous tool. The making of decisions by real consensus is impressive. Solutions to apparently unsolvable problems emerge and the group bonds around them. It is a form of social magic.

Not all secular communities seek egalitarianism as their primary aim. Feminist, green, co-operative and co-housing communities seek equality as a secondary aim; equality forms part of their larger utopia. It is essential then in the interests of legitimacy and internal social justice that decisions affecting the group should be made by the group.

This contradicts the conventional wisdom about decision-making, which has it that people are incapable of making decisions that are not simply self-interested. This debate is ages old. Aristotle asked whether people could do this in *Politics*. Machiavelli, assumed not in *The Prince* (1513). Hobbes infamously and influentially assured us that they can not in *Leviathan* (1651). An influential view observable in both liberal and conservative traditions has it that the mass of humankind is generally self-interested and self-serving and requires

government by others. There are a number of salient features to this view. Firstly, people cannot be trusted with the welfare of others and so checks and balances are required, this position rests in a theory of human nature. Secondly, most people are not competent to make decisions that transcend simple self-interest, and this justifies elitism.

This problem is nicely articulated in James Harrington's seventeenth century utopia, *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656). In a memorable passage Harrington says that it is too much to ask man to think in the common interest when sitting at a common table. He will be able to think only of his own appetites. He imagines two girls, sitting down to share a cake and asks: 'Who should cut it?' If the person who cuts is also the person who chooses, he suggests, she is likely to cut the cake unevenly and to choose the larger portion. The solution, he suggests, is as follows: "'Divide", says one to the other, "and I will choose; or let me divide and you shall choose"' (Harrington, 1992, 22). This has been the received wisdom in liberal conceptions of popular government ever since and it speaks of a separation of powers. The person who cuts the cake should not also be the person who distributes it. However, in these intentional communities, we have observed both in visits and through painstaking work on archived minute books of meetings, that it is possible to be both the person who cuts the cake and the

person who chooses *if they are one and the same*. In other words, these communities are working examples of participatory democracies in which everybody makes the decisions on everything. And this is possible only through consensus.

### **Why does consensus work in these groups?**

Why does this work? How is it possible? Are the members of these communities especially virtuous? Are they evidence against widely held assumptions of human nature and competence? Well, perhaps they are, but we rather doubt it. They are, on the whole, ordinary people who have chosen to live extraordinary lives. But within this extraordinary context they behave much like everybody else. They sometimes feel jealous or greedy or covetous or selfish. There are, we think, three differences. One lies in their commitment to the group. This may be, as Kanter believed, commitment to the cause (she identified religious commitment as the strongest bond), or to the group itself. The second significant factor is an attitude of good will and trust. This is vital. We saw in the chapter above what happens when trust breaks down. A willingness to participate in the spirit of consensus is essential, and, because it is open to abuse, trust in others to do likewise is also essential. And thirdly is the ability to participate in an appropriate manner. Consensus decision-making is not easy and requires certain learned skills. There are two final points, which have little to do with the

virtue or ability of members but a lot to do with why this works. The first is size. These groups are relatively small, they can feasibly meet to discuss issues face-to-face. The second is that members know each other, they are not a community of strangers. They are all 'on the same side', all a part of a particular 'ingroup' and further, are bound by their shared views of the world outside.

A certain amount of political education and socialisation is necessary for consensus to work and this is something that we can all learn from. Done wrong, consensus can generate an oppressive situation, which binds people to decisions they do not support: cabinet responsibility gone wrong. A persuasive speaker can sway people from their views, at least for the duration of the meeting. An articulate or confident person can dominate the debate. Lobbying can occur before the meeting. Done right, though, consensus is a fully inclusive, co-operative and non-hierarchical process structured in such a way as to permit all voices to be heard and all opinions respected. In order to do it right it is necessary to know how.

Some groups have induction procedures for training new members in consensus decision-making. Earthsong Eco-Neighbourhood, for instance, has a 'buddy' system, in which new people are given a mentor who guides them through the process. Others have written guidelines. Otamatea Ecovillage's guidelines

can be found on their website

(<http://www.conserve.org.nz/otamatea.html>). In observations of meetings it is apparent that the hardest lesson to learn about consensus is not to do with the mechanics (although this can be complicated) but rather the attitude. It seems hardest to learn to want to make decisions for the group and not the individual. Again, this is long debated in the world of political theory. Jean-Jacques Rousseau is the most optimistic about this in his *Social Contract*, and once people have become immersed in the group they do seem to be able to think in terms of something approaching a general will.

Most groups use a facilitator to guide meetings. It is this person's responsibility to ensure that everybody has a fair say and that the system is not abused. Members usually perform this role in rotation. While the facilitator remains impartial the integrity of the process remains intact. We have observed that people step aside from facilitating when they are attached to one of the views articulated. The relationship between the facilitator and the group is important:

Facilitation is where someone helps the group come to a solution by withdrawing from the discussion and focusing on the *process* of getting there. It is a role not a status. The facilitator makes suggestions about what to do, which the group may accept or reject, but never do they make

decisions for the group. The authority stays with the group. (Swain 1996: 7)

The facilitator should not try to persuade or manipulate to yield a certain outcome. The group is the decision-maker.

### **Some ways of making decisions by consensus**

Consensus is most effectively attained within a structured process in a space (i.e. meeting) dedicated to that end. The process varies but the simplest form runs like this: the situation is described by the facilitator and issues are identified; views and opinions are heard (usually in a round to ensure full participation); problems are identified by the facilitator; suggestions are generated by the group and discussed in turn; proposals are summarised by the facilitator; proposals are refined, if necessary; and, finally, the decision is recorded. This is the process at many communities, including Peterborough Community, in Christchurch, where Trystan Swain lives. He is a trainer in consensus facilitation. Trystan is thus able to disseminate good practice and generate income through experience of communal life.

The decision-making process at the Quaker Community, Friends' Settlement, is consensus driven according to long established Quaker practice:

Our decision making method--widely called consensus--is an expression of regard for each person. All members, women

and men, young and old, have an equal voice and responsibility. We do not take a vote. Instead, the Clerk (appointed by the Meeting to replace both chairperson and secretary of non-Quaker meetings) guides proceedings until he/she can feel unity in the sense of the meeting.

The Clerk records a written minute which is then read aloud. If it is acceptable to the meeting, the next item on the agenda is considered. If not, individuals suggest changes to the minute, or discussion is resumed, or the meeting "waits on the Lord" in silent prayer until a satisfactory way forward is found. (*Questions to Quakers*)

Business meetings at Friends' Settlement resemble their meetings for worship. Long periods of silence remain unbroken by the Clerk, and discussion is slow and deeply thoughtful. Solutions emerge.

Otamatea, Earthsong and Anahata Communities all use a card system to further structure meetings. This is a formal system through which discussion is structured. Each person taking part in the discussion has six coloured cards, one of which is raised at any time during the discussion to indicate a wish to speak. Each colour has special significance (Black: I have a personal/interpersonal difficulty that is preventing my full participation; Red: I have a process observation, e.g. the discussion is off the subject (a 'point of order' under Robert's

Rules); Orange: I wish to acknowledge someone or something; Yellow: I have a question or need clarification; Green: I can provide clarification and Blue: I have a comment or opinion). Meetings are guided by a facilitator who calls first on the people showing black cards to state their difficulty and make suggestions about how to deal with the matter. The group can then decide whether this should occur within the group or privately. People holding red, orange, yellow, green and blue cards are then called on to contribute. Once a proposal has been clarified and discussed the meeting moves to the decision-making stage. For this each participant has five coloured cards, signifying varying degrees of acceptance<sup>1</sup>, which are taken in turn. This process is deeply formal and is particularly effective for people who are new to consensus.

Consensus is not appropriate for every community decision or even for every community but observation overwhelmingly confirms it the most legitimate process for making binding and legitimate decisions within egalitarian groups. It is possible for everyone to learn to do this with patience and practice and the result is worth the effort.

## **2. Regarding Change**

We discovered during research for this project that change often takes people by surprise. Members of the older communities (who are best placed to reflect on this, spoke) for instance, of



being unprepared for the eventuality of people leaving, or wanting to change the groups' initial aims. We learned that change can be difficult and even traumatic, but also that it is inevitable and survivable.

**Radical change is possible without the destruction of the community.**

Many convents and religious houses have gone through radical change with some falling by the wayside, as have some other religious and secular communities. Many convents in particular have managed to incorporate significant changes into what was once quite a rigid structure. We found this, for instance, at the Community of the Sacred Name. This was once a large community of Anglican sisters, organised in a traditionally hierarchical manner. A Reverend Mother led the Community and made decisions for the group. Numbers are currently low because fewer women are seeking a contemplative religious life. The Pacific Islands are an exception to this trend and the younger members are Tongan. Some of the changes at the Community are a pragmatic response to this shrinkage in numbers. Some reflect the changed wants and beliefs of the sisters themselves. For instance, the community now contains an interesting mixture of hierarchy and democracy. Much of the physical space is still arranged to reflect a hierarchy. In the Chapel, for instance, the Reverend Mother's seat is slightly

removed from the others and Novices and Supplicants sit at a distance on hard pews. Seating in the dining room is similarly arranged, a long table covers one end of the room, and chairs are placed behind the table to face down the room. Mother Judith's upholstered seat is placed in the middle and the nuns sit in a row on either side, in hierarchical order. The most senior sit closest to the Reverend Mother and the Postulants sit furthest away. Notwithstanding this formal hierarchy, decisions are made by a democratic process in which all members have an equal say; and the working life of the community is organised on egalitarian lines, according to ability. Everyone takes a turn at cleaning the bathrooms, for instance. The community has a weekly meeting, called a *conference*, at which day-to-day issues are discussed and decisions are made, disagreements go to a vote and a two-thirds majority is necessary to carry a decision.

In order to survive over time The Community of the Sacred Name has had to change. It may need to change more in order to adapt to the shrinking numbers. The large building, which is home to the community (ominous from the outside but beautiful inside) would no doubt convert into flats. The sisters may have to face leaving their traditional home and moving into smaller premises.

Riverside is New Zealand's oldest secular community. It is over sixty years old and amazingly has survived for all of

that time as an income-sharing group. We know of none other like this. And yet Riverside has made enormous changes to its identity and goals over the years. It was founded as a Methodist Pacifist community during World War II and offered refuge to the wives of men interned for refusing to fight. In the 1970s it dropped its religious affiliation. This proved extremely traumatic and members who have been at Riverside for fifty years or more recall those days as difficult ones. It has also changed from being a community with, if not a leadership, then at least a strong core and when any strong person left this created a void. They self-govern by consensus and the minute books from their meetings have been lodged in the National Library. They make interesting reading and from them we can learn of the discussions that occurred during these transitional phases. The latest crisis, or crossroads, for Riverside concerns the income-pool, an issue that has been forced by two new members. Both high earners, they want to keep their income and some possessions (like a car) and yet want to belong to Riverside. In 2001 a compromise had been reached in which one partner belonged fully to the community and the other did not but lived as a tenant. The community was taking this challenge very seriously, and rather than taking the attitude 'don't join then!' was preparing to discuss the future of the pool. In part this is because Riverside has low numbers of full members at the moment.

Of the sixty or so potential living spaces for people, more than half are rented out to non-members. Perhaps, they thought, new recruits were put off by the requirement to surrender all goods to the community and to live in relative poverty.

It is impossible to know how well founded this fear is. We have observed that new communities, like Otamatea, attract a mixture of people, including some professional people who do not want to give up either job or income and who desire a relatively high standard of living, whilst remaining committed to ecological sustainability. It is tempting to make generational claims here--perhaps the people in their thirties and forties now have a different set of shared experiences and different expectations from those whose formative years fell in the 1930s and 1940s, or even the 1960s. This younger group would have had formative years under a government that destroyed the welfare state, ended free health care at the point of delivery, abolished child benefit and promoted a spending and credit boom. The 'Great Experiment' in New Zealand made Margaret Thatcher's Britain and Ronald Reagan's America look positively conservative (with a small 'c'). The radicalism and speed of the economic changes made during this time certainly changed practices drastically, perhaps it also shifted values. Whatever its cause, it is a fact that most people who enter communities today are of a different generation than those who are already there.

## **Change is necessary and difficult**

Change, like conflict, is both difficult and necessary. Dynamism is necessary even in utopia and, as stated above, we do not adhere to the once-held belief that utopias represent (or even seek) perfection. There is always room for improvement, always another horizon about which to dream. Joy, a longtime resident of Riverside, spoke of this when asked to explain the longevity of this extraordinary community. She touches on many things in her reply, including determination and trust:

I don't think it [Riverside] will collapse now, I think it will change. I know it needs to change, not fundamental beliefs. I don't know whether income sharing will continue, whether it's relevant today or even as important as we might have thought. It has been an important thing to the community, but it may go. You don't have to achieve all the things you aim at. As you grow into them, the level you aspire to changes, and you move on. It shifts--it's that maturity isn't it? (Joy, Riverside: 22.02.01)

Change and adaptation to change are essential for a vibrant community.

## **There will always be a turnover of membership.**

People will come and go. None of the communities visited contained all of the original members. This itself is a cause of pain and distress and upheaval. Relationships in intentional

communities tend to be intense and are different from friendships. Often, when a person is thinking of leaving (or even before they begin to actually consider it), there is a period of distancing. That person will withdraw, perhaps to his or her own living space and perhaps outside the group, to spend time with different people. They start to see the community differently, to be aware of its faults and flaws and not its strengths. Life can be quite uncomfortable while this occurs. And once the announcement is made, there is often a feeling of betrayal or sadness amongst those who are to be left behind. People have used the vocabulary of bereavement and abandonment to describe how it feels when somebody leaves the group.

In social terms then, the community has to adjust to this. But it can be even more difficult when there are also financial ties that bind a group together. Most of the communities in New Zealand involve some financial commitment for full membership. New members need to buy a home (Karuna Falls), or build a home (Awaawaroa), or purchase shares (Katajuta), or purchase a lease (Friends Settlement). Only in a small handful of communities are members all tenants. The older communes were unprepared for this eventuality and this is why some lie empty. Ophui members, for instance, have nearly all left the community to live elsewhere, either because their children grew up to want to be somewhere less remote, or because they sought work in the

cities or for other personal reasons. They still meet at Ophui once a year but the (now quite valuable) land is mostly unoccupied. Sometimes members cannot afford to leave their stake in the community and want to be bought out, either by the collective or by a new person who will take their place. This has obvious difficulties--the existing group may not have the funds, or may not want just anybody to join them--and communities need robust agreements and how to divide the land and how to measure its value when people come and go.

We have encountered many examples of communities who have been unpleasantly surprised by what has happened when people leave. The story of Katajuta was wittily told but poignant. A new person came to Katajuta after it had been established for some years. After he had been with them for a while he appeared naked before them one day and proclaimed himself to be Jesus and demanded that they acknowledge him as their leader. Katajuta has always been very relaxed and had few formal rules at the time. They had none concerning the entrance of new members (no way of screening) and none regarding exit (no way of getting him to leave). The result was, by all accounts, a difficult period. Their current community agreements are included as an appendix, and it is apparent that much thought has gone into drafting the sections on issues of entrance and exit. Of the ten agreements,

four concern entrance and exit and these are by far the longest and most explicit of all the rules.

### **People change**

Sometimes, when people enter a relationship young they grow apart. Sometimes they grow together. Similarly, sometimes, people join an intentional community in their twenties and discover after some years that their needs and wants have changed. Indeed, this can happen at any age. Life changes, bereavement, divorce or separation, a new partner, aging children, illness, or simply growing older can all shift a person's priorities. This can cause problems in a community. It can lead to calls for a change in practices (such as the introduction of television or dedicated space for teenagers). It can lead to a shift in some members' core values (which can produce intense conflict). It can mean that the community is no longer an appropriate place to live. These changes need to be carefully negotiated and those communities that are flexible about practices seem most likely to adapt.

Intentional communities are places in which people experience change. Many people spoke of this during interviews. Often this is a consequence of living in the community:

I think you go through some kind of metamorphosis if you live in one. If people haven't experienced living in one, they will go through some change, whether it is negative or



positive. I'm aware that some people who have lived here had a bad time, basically because it wasn't on their wavelength, they just couldn't do it. I don't even know if I can do it, I'm not sure (Whare, Chippenham, 12.03.01).

People come here and they last two days and crack up. The people who live here are used to it, they are used to people cracking up and bursting into tears. We don't know why but we think it has something to do with the land drawing people's emotions out. What I heard before I came to this community was that if you go to Tui you will see yourself and experience transformation. It does have an effect on people, so people who live here are quite skilled in helping people through their processes, not pushing them or trying to fix them (Selma, Tui, 04.04.01).

Often people decide to join an intentional community because they want to change; they seek self-discovery, development or improvement. Sometimes, though, these changes are less to do with the community and more to do with life itself. Transitions, such as the move from childhood to adulthood, youth to middle age, middle age to old age, all involve losses and gains and sometimes people become less committed to the group as a consequence. Similarly, a new relationship can be a major distraction and somebody who, for years, has been a linchpin in

a group can become quite distanced and start to want different things. Size is a factor here. A small group will often struggle to accommodate these changes because in such communities each person has an established role (peacemaker, treasurer, ideas person) and the transition in the individual creates an unfillable gap in the group. In larger communities or ones with fluid membership these gaps are more easily filled by existing or new members.

Sometimes change (either to the individual or the group, or both) means that people leave the group and we met people who had moved from for instance Rainbow Valley to Riverside, Katajuta to Riverside, and Mamaki to Anahata. In the case of Katajuta, this came at a time when a single woman wanted a quieter life than was possible at the then rather wild community of Katajuta. Excessive drug use, an accusation of rape, and the general behaviour of some young male teenagers all contributed to her decision. Riverside offered a more committed, peaceful and spiritual way of life, and this suited her needs.

Sometimes a period in an intentional community is part of a transition in a person's life.

In terms of the people living here, we've all changed a lot. I think when we leave this place we'll have gained a lot. I think it's a bit of a transitory place for a lot of people. People come here with something to sort out for

themselves, and they leave having sorted it, ready to take the next permanent move in their lives or whatever (Tess, Gricklegrass, 05.01.01).

There are people across the land who have lived in an intentional community for a time. New Zealand has such a small population that these people represent a significant number, rather than an aberrant minority, and their contribution to the wider culture has been manifold. High profile former communards include Marion Hobbs, MP (in Cabinet in 2004) who was a founder member of Chippenham, and Tim Shadbolt, currently long-serving Mayor of Invercargill, who was a radical activist and commune founder. We have met radio and television presenters, MPs, academics, economists, accountants, builders, librarians, fishermen and artists who at one time lived in communities.

### **3. Children:**

**Intentional communities are marvellous places for small children and the parents of small children.**

Many people speak fondly of their childhoods in intentional communities. There are, of course, exceptions. Many of the former Centrepoint Community children had seriously traumatic experiences and not all children in other communities had happy childhoods. But, on the whole, it is our observation that communities are good places in which to spend one's early childhood. In most, children receive plenty of attention from

adults (there's usually somebody willing to read a story), consultative parenting in which children are involved in negotiating the rules that apply to them, and have other children to play with. Some communities were founded especially in order to create a different and better environment in which to bring up children. Timatanga was founded around a school and Robyn, from Rainbow Valley, cites 'the children's education' as the most important thing about her life in that community. Te Ora is very focused on Mountain Valley School, founded by its members as well as members of the nearby Graham Downs Community (also known as Renaissance). These alternative schools are based on Montessori learning methods in which the children decide what they want to learn each day. Observation of children inside intentional communities and community schools show them to be very mature when it comes to resolving disputes, making decisions and considering options.

**They are less good for teenagers.**

Just as children leave home in the wider community, most people who spent their childhoods in an intentional community left in young adulthood. Sometimes this is because they wanted to 'do their own thing', be their own people and find their own path in life. Some return. Whare and his partner Charlotte had recently joined Chippenham Community when I first visited in January 2001. Whare had lived at Chippenham as a child and

teenager and had left to return some five years later.

Chippenham is city-based and lively, offering them a combination of security, belonging, a co-operative lifestyle, freedom and fun that they sought at the time.

Sometimes, though, the community itself and the nature of life inside an intentional community are intolerable for teenagers. This is especially noticeable in rural communities. Lack of easy transport, entertainment and other people of the same age can create real problems for young people. Generally, our observations indicate that teenagers experience the same range of problems inside communities as in the wider community. The usual teenage embarrassment about parents can be all the more intense if one's parents are ageing hippies. Boredom, rampant hormones and resentment remain much the same.

Some communities draw teenagers. This has been the case historically at Happisam, which has at times in its history been infamous for heavy drug use. The Minutes of community meetings at neighbouring Rainbow Valley show that this influx caused some concern. A large concentration of teenagers can create problems in a group. Often the founders of intentional communities are reluctant to lay down the law and tend to be permissive.

Sometimes this works and teenage members work things out for themselves. Sometimes it does not and a community can spin out of control.

**4. Balancing needs: People who live in intentional communities need to learn how to balance their own needs with those of the group.**

This is important. Members of intentional communities are people with everyday needs and wants. The group has collective needs and wants. We observed, through visits and close reading of minutes from meetings that one of two things can occur--both of which are destabilising and disturbing. The first is the free rider. The second is burn out. These are antithetical but both can be difficult. We discussed conflict at some length in the chapter above and free riding is a major cause of domestic conflict. Anger will flash over a pile of dirty dishes one day--the underlying issue is often a history of unequal input. Having discussed conflict and its management at some length above we do not intend to rehearse those debates here, but simply note that a free-rider is a leech on a group's collective energy. Sometimes a lazy person is tolerated because they contribute in other ways that are valued by members. They might, for instance, be lots of fun, or brilliant in one valuable aspect. Usually, however, they are eventually pressed to leave the group.

The opposite is also a problem. Kanter, in her seminal work, makes much of the positive function of commitment in intentional communities. It is, she says, the glue that binds a group and helps it to survive over time. It is our observation

that too much commitment can be a bad thing. If people give too much to the group and neglect their own needs and self-maintenance, they become dysfunctional. This can lead to resentment, exhaustion and ultimately mental or physical breakdown. This can be found in all aspects of life--at the workplace, in the home and in any situation of group interaction. But it is dangerous to the individual and unhealthy for the group. The individual's physical health is at risk and the group's internal dynamics are unsustainable if it drains too heavily from its members. People need to give and to receive from the community in which they choose to live. The relationship needs to be one of mutual nurturance.

**5. Sustainability. intentional communities need to be sustainable.**

Our research has identified four aspects to a sustainable community--financial, social, spiritual and environmental. The first two factors are essential. Members of some groups also feel that environmental and spiritual sustainability are necessary and these have been thoroughly discussed in chapters above. Often they are inseparable:

I think community living is an environmental thing as well a social thing and I'd like [Chippenham] to focus more that way if we can--if people are interested. People here do think about those things, they think about the world and

the political situation in various parts of the country and the world. All these things are connected and you can't tackle one without the other. Even on a small scale (Fiona, Chippenham, 12.03.01).

**a) Financial sustainability.**

For a community to be viable it needs to be financially sustainable. This has several aspects.

**Earning a living**

Members need sufficient material sustenance. Even a group like Riverside, committed to voluntary 'poverty' needs to ensure that its members live comfortably and are fed, clothed and warm. This can be achieved collectively, through an income pool but more usually community members generate their own income. Some communities combine collective income and individual income. At Graham Downs, for instance, a cash crop of pine trees was planted some twenty years ago, which will soon be ready for harvest by the community.

Historically many communards have relied on state welfare benefits. These were cut in the 1980s, and some groups found themselves unable to continue. A culture of independence has evolved and nowadays few people in communities rely on benefits.

Earning money is more difficult in some locations than in others. Members of remote rural communities, for instance, can find this a real problem. However, the climate in most of New



Zealand is good, and many communities grow most of their own food. Wilderland is probably the best known case. Gricklegrass aims to be self-sufficient as far as possible, buying in corn and rice. But in most cases people earn a living outside the community. We found people working in a wide range of occupations living in communities, which included university lecturers, computer consultants, firemen/women, teachers, counsellors, specialists in personal development and psychology, conflict mediators, spiritual guides, farmers, fishers, artists, including glass makers, painters, potters, weavers and mask-makers. Some have their own businesses producing calendars, providing eco-tourism, telesales, internet consultancy and web design, offering training in various aspects of ecological or social design and hosting B&B (for example, to the crew for *The Lord of the Rings*). Some work casually on local farms; some work away and come home at weekends. There is no model to follow and no one way of earning a living. Even within a community there will be a range of occupations, such as mussel farmer, academic, worker in a co-operative store and artist. What *is* necessary is that a living is generated.

**The community needs secure tenure over its land and/or property.**

On this issue the New Zealand communities face two problems. One is perennial: how to find enough land on which to base a sustainable community? Groups across the world face this

problem. The other is particular to New Zealand and concerns legal restrictions on land use: how to own and occupy the land together legally? The perennial problem has been less of an issue in New Zealand where historically land has been cheap and plentiful. Nowadays this is not the case. There is plenty of space in New Zealand still but prices are inhibitive for many new groups. The particular problem is complicated. The two communities in this bicultural nation are subject to different land laws; which presents a problem to these communities: it is difficult for non-Maori groups to own and occupy land collectively. People in intentional communities have devised ingenious ways around New Zealand's restrictive laws on land use but often their occupancy is only marginally legal. Sometimes they live illegally on their land. This leaves them vulnerable to prosecution and so most tend to assume a low profile and not to publicise the numbers of people and houses on their plot of land. This has proved to be the single most serious problem to New Zealand's intentional communities and local solutions are worth a brief examination.

The main issue is not the ownership of land but rather its use and occupancy. Multiple ownership is possible (see Appendix II), though difficult, but at some point in their history most of the older communes have tried to expand. This has presented problems regarding the legal occupation of the

land. In rural contexts, local planning regulations tend to prohibit multiple occupancy in 'Rural A' land. Farms are supposed to be self-sustaining financial units and the land, it is judged, cannot sustain more than one household. The communities, in order to gain original planning permission, often wrote their (required) Management Plans to accord with local regulations and included statements asserting their financial viability as working farms. Most of the older communes, however, did not really seek to 'farm' the land but rather to conserve it, permitting native bush and indigenous fauna to recover from generations of logging, sheep farming (involving clearance of plant life) and pine forestry.

The land these communities purchased was usually remote hill country and simply could not sustain more than one household, even if it were farmed conventionally. This presented a problem when communities (invariably) applied for permission to build further homes. Applications for expansion are assessed by local councils against the community's Management Plan. If a community was not found to be self-sustaining then it could not justify expansion.

Julie Sargisson's study of communities on the Coromandel Peninsula summarises problems of occupancy (Sargisson, 1990). She suggests that the problems stem from assumptions embedded in Pakeha culture and manifested in laws of occupancy. It is

assumed that non-Maori people should not live outside of nuclear families (where one household occupies and uses one section of land). She notes that the laws are threefold, concerning planning permission, building regulations and health regulations (6). Each of these restricts multiple occupancy. Current building regulations were imported from the UK in 1946 and are, she suggests, inappropriate to the contemporary economic and social context of New Zealand (9). Health regulations are concerned to prevent accidents and disease and assume this to be less likely through single-occupancy titles to land. The new generation of intentional communities wants to change the regulations rather than be forced to live illegally on their own land.

This could be resolved by turning to Maori land law. Pakeha land laws derive from the feudal 'Torrens' system, which grants 'titles', or sole entitlements to land. A landmark Act, the 1993 Te Ture Whenua Maori Act, permitted Maori communities five types of land owning trusts. These are Putea, Whanau, Ahu Whenua, Whenua topu and Kaitiaki trusts. The Act aimed to inhibit further alienation and fragmentation of Maori land. Some aspects of Putea and Whanau Trusts might transfer well to intentional communities of mixed of Pakeha ethnicity. Putea trusts are small, uneconomic interests [in land] pooled for the common benefit without individual dividends. They can be created

to prevent further fragmentation and to assist cultural and social development, while at the same time retaining ownership of ancestral land. Whanau trusts are not dissimilar, preserving family links to particular land, turangawaewae, but without expectation of individual interests or dividends. Consent from all owners is required(Durie, 1998:136).

Intentional communities seek to own land in a way that permits collective management and ownership. It can be seen from this brief summary that this is possible, though difficult. Land ownership in New Zealand is complex but can be adapted to multiple ownership. The more intractable problems, as Sargisson points out, stem from rules of land occupancy and planning permissions. Owning the land is one thing, being allowed to build on it and occupy it is another.

### **Somewhere to turn to when the money runs out**

There is one organisation, Prometheus, without which many of the communities discussed in this book would not exist. Prometheus is an ethical financing company, which has provided loans to intentional communities across the country. Between 2001-2003, for instance, it lent money for projects in Orapui, Earthsong and Otamatea communities and to Mountain Valley School, which is not an intentional community but is connected to the communities of Graham Downs (also known as Renaissance) and Te Ora. They self-describe as 'banking with a heart' and

support projects that are 'environmentally friendly and socially valuable' (<http://www.prometheus.co.nz>)

Prometheus assisted Earthsong by providing a short-term loan when their building contractors went into liquidation and, further, has provided loans to individual members in order to assist with the purchase of their homes by unit title:

Prometheus is willing to look at factors other than strict income and equity ratios in approving loans. We were thus able to approve loans for some community members that more conventional finance organisations might not have.

Of the four houses we have provided finance for to date [27.05.03], two of these loans have enabled families into their eco-houses, and a third enabled an individual to purchase a studio unit and join the community. The remaining loan was for a women's co-house with a formal partnership agreement specifying ownership shares between the three women co-owners (ibid.).

## **b) Social sustainability.**

### **Physical space**

It is extremely difficult to maintain an intentional community unless the physical space meets the group's needs. One factor is location (it is difficult to meditate next door to a nightclub); another is the arrangement of space inside the community land. For instance, a group that wants to explore

interpersonal relationships will have different requirements from a group that seeks individual spiritual development through quiet contemplation. The importance of physical layout is increasingly recognised within communities.

Earthsong has carried this to its limit, considering each aspect of spatial design in the light of its contribution to a viable social community. Older communities that adapt pre-existing buildings (like Chippenham, Mansfield and Earthspirit) were not able to design from scratch and have to make best use of existing structures. Nut, from Earthspirit, spoke about this in interview. Earthspirit has one large community house, which is currently home to one member. The others live in temporary dwellings on the plot. This layout has been one of the reasons that the community is not larger. Members discovered that they needed to live in separate homes, but inhibitive planning and building regulations made it impossible to build. This is a disincentive to people who might want to make Earthspirit their home:

Space makes a big difference for me in a community--how the houses are set up. Earthspirit is not the way I would do it. I would have a bigger piece of land (which we didn't have the money for anyway) but have small separate houses. This is not set up for a bigger community (Nut, Earthspirit, 11.04.01).

The only way that Earthspirit could legally expand would be to use the main building as communal living space. After nearly twenty years of experimentation, the existing members know that this is not how they want to live:

It could [expand] if it was really necessary, with smaller spaces for everyone [within the large house] with a community place. But then, probably if we did that, it would change again and I wouldn't want that, it would be something different, but I do know space wise it does make a difference how things are set up. I don't like us all spending money on our own firewood all the time, for instance, and it seems like a waste in some ways to just have three of us here (ibid.).

One group that thought about this in its early days was Peterborough. Peterborough is city based, near the centre of Christchurch and consists of several neighbouring houses that all have road frontage. Behind each house is a small semi-enclosed garden and behind these they have created a large open space that runs the length of the houses, which contains buildings and a large area where children can run and play. Here, at the back of the property, is the 'most communal' space.

Working from the back of the property forwards, one moves from 'most communal' to 'least communal' space. The large buildings at the back belong to the community and are available



for collective use. At one time, they housed community businesses. They currently provide storage space and the community office is located in one of them. Then comes the strip of shared space, which is mostly used by the children--it is a place away from the road for riding bicycles, running and letting off steam. In front of this are the household gardens and in front of these (at the front of the property) are the houses. Gardens are laid out in such a way as to afford each household some privacy but they have no gates or fences. They are well maintained. In order to enter the houses, one has to walk around the back of the property to the backdoor. My first visit was in the evening and because the community was urban I had neglected to bring a torch! For this visit I had been invited to a community meal, which was 'pot luck' with everybody bringing some food. Within the houses, shared space is the first to be encountered. Some houses are home to single people and some to families. In the singles homes this space is an open plan kitchen/lounge and dining area. Behind this, at the furthest point from the 'most communal' space are people's private bedrooms. In this way Peterborough has adapted and designed space to maximise communal interaction whilst preserving private spaces.

### **Social Structures**

Just as physical space can work for or against a community's aims, so can social structures and successful communities employ structures and processes in which form echoes function. Egalitarian communities require fully participatory structures. Other structures were discussed in Chapter Eight. These include agreed procedures for the management of conflict. Conflict will not disappear, but must be managed effectively if a group is to meet its members needs. A related component of a successful community is communication. Poor communication within a group can quickly lead to misunderstandings and resentment. Some groups, like Anahata, have agreed processes for communication. Others, like Valley Farm Ecovillage, have undergone training. Others, like Tui, have time dedicated in meetings to sharing 'heartbusiness'. Communication is essential for a community's sustainability across time.

### **The behaviour of members**

Other key factors in establishing a socially sustainable community involve the personal deportment or behaviour of members. A certain amount of commitment is necessary as is a willingness to negotiate, compromise and see the point of view of other people:

If you live in a community, you have to have an ability to put yourself in somebody else's shoes and you have to understand that your values and views may differ from your

neighbours, and that it's their right as long as they keep it to themselves (Bronwyn, Timatanga, 22.03.01).

Many people cited respect for the right of others to hold differing views as an essential learned behaviour. This can take years of practice and is difficult because it is also necessary to be able to communicate your own point of view. Drawing on over fifty years of experience at Riverside community, Joy spoke of this:

Of course if you are selfish or grasping or lazy, I don't think you would feel happy living like this, but if you are friendly and open and prepared to compromise sometimes and be compassionate and reasonably tolerant, (I don't mean soft, you should stick to your principles and stick to your values), then you would be more likely to make a success of it.

She continues by expanding on the thought in parentheses. It is necessary, she says, to be able to do three things: firstly, to hold and express your own view. This requires a certain amount of strength. Secondly, to allow other people to express and hold their position, which may be different, or even operating on a very different level, to your own way of thinking. And thirdly, Joy identifies a need to balance the part of yourself that is a member of the group and the part of yourself who is a private individual with particular--perhaps selfish or antisocial but

nonetheless strong--wants. If this tricky balancing act is achieved, she says, the community will be vibrant, full of necessarily strong personalities, bound to a common set of values and collective aims, and meeting their own needs. The result is a group with internal cohesion as well as diversity:

[T]hat's the richness of the group. It depends on allowing people to be individuals...

As an individual, you to try and maintain two levels-- yourself and what you believe and you as a member of the group. Somehow you have to function in a way that doesn't undermine the integrity of either (Joy, Riverside: 22.02.01)

The combination of internal heterogeneity and cohesion identified by Joy is an ideal, almost a utopia in itself. Certain measures can help a group to move towards this. For instance, in Chapter Eight we considered steps taken by groups to maximise communication and to socialise new members into the ways of the group. When the influx of new people arrived in 2001 at Anahata, the group needed to start building these systems and processes:

There are slightly more children here than adults. It is challenging. For instance X's style of parenting is far more permissive than mine--she encourages children to express themselves. Sometimes that irritates me. When

someone else's child does something you wouldn't let your children do, your children say "Why do we have to go to bed--so and so doesn't have to go to bed?" Some of the kids don't go to school [they are home educated] and so bed time isn't important because they don't have to get up in the morning. My children perceive that the others can play at home all day and they feel it's a rip off. We had a long discussion about food. You can't watch them all the time. Some of the parents didn't want the pantry locked because they wanted their children to be able to snack. You have to make compromises and integrate other people's style. Sometimes its really hard work and we all find it difficult sometimes. Other people interact with your children in a way that you wouldn't necessarily do ... We stopped buying Nutella. You should have seen it when we first moved down here ... I was horrified, they were gorging themselves on stuff that I thought was junk. (Lindsay, Anahata, 19.05.02)

The picture conjured by this extract is chaotic. Clashes of different parenting styles, an uncoordinated food purchasing system in which the purchaser (one of the few non-parents) simply replaced supplies as they were used, an unlocked food pantry, combine with different rules over bed times and general comportment: little wonder that tempers frayed. By the time of my visit some of these issues had been resolved but the noise

levels generated by the children in this community were extreme and continued late into every night.

## **7. The need for support**

Finally, and in addition to internal financial and social sustainability, these communities require external support networks. This comes in a number of forms. We have already discussed Prometheus and the provision of financial support. Our focus here is on structural and cultural support.

Housing co-operatives are, as we saw in Chapter Six, under-represented nationally by the New Zealand Cooperative Association. This is regrettable, not least because of the need for changes in legislation regarding planning, building and multiple occupancy of land. An effective lobbying body could help with this.

The support networks that do exist are organised by communities themselves and provide contact and advice. The main one of these is *Chip'N'Away*, which started life as Chippenham Community's newsletter but which has now grown to be a national newsletter. This is funded by the Heartwood Trust and has survived not least because of the dedication of its editor, Dave Welch. Editions of *Chip'N'Away* are produced on a quarterly basis and are distributed to intentional communities across the country. Individual communities are encouraged to submit copy and the newsletter combines news articles from different

communities with the discussion of broader issues that effect intentional communities. It is an invaluable source of communication and contact amongst communities.

There are also national non-governmental organisations, such as the New Zealand Eco-Village and Co-Housing Group, whose website offers practical advice about legal matters as well as links and news to and about individual communities.

Communication is a key factor not only within communities but also amongst communities. Some of these communities are in remote locations and can easily become introverted. Contact with other, similar, groups can reaffirm their original vision, acting as a reminder that whilst everybody struggles sometimes with life in a community, it is being done for a wider reason.

This can help combat the loneliness of being different, the isolation of being a lone voice, a sole campaigner, maverick, freak or weirdo. Boundaries are important and difference requires a safe space in which to flourish. This is one of the strengths of intentional communities: they are generally safe and relatively contained spaces in which alternatives can be tried, tested and explored. However, this has its negative aspects, if experimentation occurs in a completely closed space, 'free' from scrutiny, interaction or observation, this can produce disassociation from conventional standards of right and wrong. Again, this can be useful. It can

help people who want to escape materialism and to explore alternative ways of being. Also, though, it can permit abusive relations to seem the norm. This seems to have been the case at Centrepont.

Once again, communication emerges as a key factor. Communication between intentional communities (or other spaces of difference) and the wider community has multiple effects. People inside the community are encouraged to reflect upon and perhaps articulate and explain their way of life, its codes and norms. People outside the community learn through contact with members about other ways of living. This happens casually, through contact in the workplace, as well as through participation in local projects, such as women's refuges, alternative schools and community gardens. Even so, life is not easy for those who choose to live differently:

That is the worst part, and all the stresses that you have to deal with when you are doing something different and you haven't got support for it; you are isolated, and the world is not going where you want it to go; you are just hoping that you can hold a flame alight long enough until the world realises it needs it. (Chrissie, Te Ora: 02.02.01)

### **Final Words**

The story told in this book is one of a long tradition of utopianism. Social dreamers have, for centuries, been drawn to



realise their utopias in New Zealand. Common themes emerge from their criticisms of the modern world: it is too fast, crowded with unnecessary things, materialistic and full of constant questing for things that are not really necessary, it is individualistic and this leaves people lonely and isolated, even amongst a crowd. Life in the mainstream, these people tell us, is unfulfilling, lacks commitment, and is a life without soul.

These communities are an attempt at something better. We have found a myriad of influences from religious and spiritual beliefs, ideology and politics, as well as a deep sense of personal unease and a strong desire to do something about this. We have tried, in this volume, to begin to explain why so many people have been willing to put their life behind them and withdraw to a space in which to try to live differently.

Joining a community is not something that people do lightly. It is a big commitment. It is difficult. And these places are not perfect. They are not somewhere where all of life's problems are solved. However, they are, usually, felt by their members to be worth the effort and better than the alternatives. They are ever-changing and dynamic. They have highs and lows but (if they don't fold) they continue onwards towards that horizon that is utopia.

## **Footnotes for Conclusion**

<sup>1</sup> Parts of the section are based on Sargent (1994)

<sup>2</sup> Red: I am entirely against the proposal and will block the consensus; Orange: I have a serious reservation but I am not willing to block the consensus; Yellow: I have a question to be answered before I can make a decision; Blue: I am neutral or basically for it, with some slight reservation; Green: I agree with the proposal.

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