Lessons from Community Conflicts

Declan and Margrit Kennedy

Whether we refer to the questionable results of the so-called "green revolution," the exploitation of Third World countries, the global environmental pollution, the debt crisis, or the absurdity of European agricultural subsidies, we are now coming closer to the limits of what we used to define as "progress." The experiments with community living in Steyerberg, Germany show that our common co-existence depends, finally, on how we break through the narrow and limited attitudes with which we make communal or political decisions. We can imagine a wider use of our experiences of community and spirituality in other eco-villages, co-housing projects, and urban and rural intentional communities around the world.

Why have we moved into a community?

We decided to join a community because we wanted to implement a permaculture model and we realized that was almost impossible to do by ourselves on a meaningful scale. For instance, we could imagine producing vegetables, but not selling them on the market. By living in a community, this necessity would not even arise.

However, we also wanted a very special combination of community characteristics. In our search for a place—which went on for exactly three years (1982-85)—we found two types of communities.

The first type was the eco-technological community, like Stanley, Tasmania; Langenbruck, Switzerland; Svanholm, Denmark; or Springe-Eldagsen, Germany. They did a very good job in terms of developing new ecological techniques, such as highly productive, low work, food producing systems; ecological stoves, cars, and solar collectors; organic food for the market; zero-energy houses; controlled ventilation; and root-zone sewage treatment systems—all in the middle of the 1980's. However, in our view, these groups underestimated the whole question of social relationships, assuming that when all members had the same ideal, i.e., ecology, this question would take care of itself. But it usually did not—and unresolved conflicts can make life rather unpleasant.

The second type was the spiritual community, like Findhorn, Scotland; Wetzhausen, Germany; some Sanyassin communities in Australia, or anthroposophic communities in Germany and Sweden. They developed unusually pleasant human interrelationships and practiced "love your neighbor as yourself" —and produced fantastic vegetables. But, either we found them too limited in their following of one guru and in their implementation of one particular path, or we found them lacking in ecological feryor. Therefore, we realized that we had to be part of creating a new community which would combine the social/spiritual aspects and the ecological aspects.

The community of Lebensgarten, which we became a part of, started when a businessman from Berlin bought a dilapidated housing estate which had been originally planned and built in 1939 as workers quarters for an ammunition factory. After the war, it was used as a barracks by the English army, then it stood empty for almost eight years. Together with six others, on December 17, 1984, he decided to initiate a spiritual and ecological center there.

The housing area has 65 row houses and various community buildings. We moved in in October 1985 and were the seventh party present. Within three years after the purchase, all the houses had been either bought or rented by people interested in participating in this social experiment. There are now over 100 adults and approximately 50 children as members of this community—of different ages, social and professional backgrounds, religions, and objectives.

How did it work out in Lebensgarten, Steyerberg?

Well, it was difficult. Particularly during the first five years, we had extremely severe conflicts among each other. None of us were educated to deal with the multi-faceted relationships in a community. We all had come from nuclear family backgrounds. We all had different dreams and visions, and we all wanted to implement our vision.

The first discovery we made was that we all had to let go of our dreams....before we could accomplish them in a somewhat modified form later on. We dreamt about a whole ecological technology center, something like the Welsh Centre for Alternative Technology. That never materialized because the members were more interested in their own self-development than being partners in a business and sharing the "capitalist's risks."

The second discovery we made was that we all had quite similar problems in accepting others—and, as it turned out invariably, mainly with those who reflected some unknown shadow side of ourselves. We remember a man who came along one day and wanted to be a member. He looked like a little grey mouse and had cold, sweaty, wet hands which we had to catch when we danced our morning dances. We both had problems accepting him at first—until we realized that, at some stage in both our lives, we had felt just as insecure and socially unwanted as he did when he arrived into what he perceived as a well-knit community. And, in fact, those similar negative experiences had been part of the driving forces in our lives. We had to look at them anew and love them. And then we could look at him anew and love him too. Since then, he works with us on things like geomancy, dowsing, and energy points in our community and elsewhere and has become a stalwart friend to both of us.

The third discovery, based on the second, was that once we understood and looked upon that shadow side of ourselves, lifting it up into the light of our consciousness, the problem within us—and with the other person who reflected the problem—began to disappear, sometimes instantly.

Since, fourthly, there are many people in our large community—by 1988 Lebensgarten was comprised of approximately 50 adults and 30 children—many opportunities for this learning process occur. We all had to develop very quickly. Otherwise, our conflicts would have destroyed the functioning of the group as a whole.

Fortunately, and this is a fifth communal point, it feels really good to learn to accept one's self and others, more and more, and one begins to look at conflict in a different way: "Hey! There is something to learn again—be creative and enjoy it!"

Therefore, in the "pressure cooker for personal development," as the two of us sometimes call the Lebensgarten, we begin to be able to communicate with people at a continuously deeper level of understanding. We noticed that learning was beginning to get easier, happen faster, and was happening with more and more fun involved, instead of pain. That, we feel, is real progress. Our growing sense of love and accomplishment is reflected in the outside world. Things are not only beginning to look better on the inside, but also on the ecological level in our immediate environment.

Ecology was certainly not second priority in our case, but for a time, the human aspects were paramount. However, now the Lebensgarten has also accomplished quite a bit in terms of recycling its old pre-World War II buildings into dwellings and facilities for the seminar program. The latter passes on part of what our community has learned about conflict resolution to others from the outside, for instance, in our school of mediation (the "Fight Light School").

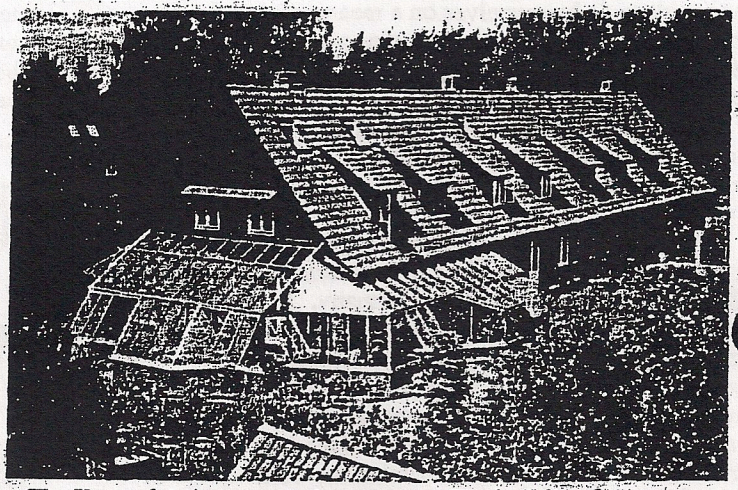
How did this experience affect our professional lives?

In our answer to this question, we must explain one other common experience: that we all learned to do what we can do best; and to do it as well as we can. Thus we are better in contributing to the community, but also to ourselves and to the universe.

Margrit, while she wanted to implement our permaculture model, realized that first she had to write a book about money—or a sustainable money system—as a basis for a sustainable world economy. After having refused this idea for four years—for not being an economist, she wrote the initial book in four days. Many other small miracles happened in fulfilling this task, but the most amazing is how this message keeps spreading "on its own." The inner conflict of not being able to tackle such a worldwide task was resolved by a whole host of helpers all over the world—and up there too—taking the message further.

Declan continued his "permaculture" work and found others to help him. Lots of conflict in this process often made it feel like sowing and weeding on a human relationship level—and in himself too. His "real" task was, however, networking and going out to other countries in Europe—spreading the message and the permaculture principles for rural and urban settings. He went to countries which had experienced peace for many years like Sweden, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Ireland, the USA, Brazil, and Italy, but also countries which were in a state of conflict: Poland before the change, Croatia during the war, Slovenia just after the separation from Yugoslavia, building up from nothing.

In almost all circumstances, the courses and the trainings were as much mediation as permaculture. Then came projects in Eastern Germany. After the reunification, this region was the target for those out to make a quick D-Mark, with some notable exceptions. For instance, Axel Wittig-Hohnstein, a "Westerner," tried to implement a complex ecological settlement adjacent to the old town of Hohnstein, where his ancestors had lived. Declan became the official ecological director, but again, his main task was to animate and mediate between different planning consultants as well as between them and the residents of Hohnstein.



The Kennedy's home at Lebensgarten. The building houses two other private residences and rooms for the Permaculture Institute

This trust in doing what we enjoy most and being true to our hearts has developed in the community. We did not only experience this within ourselves, individually, but also with others around us in the community, which made our lessons much more penetrating and real. Although we see ourselves as professional planners in almost all our projects, often this ability to mediate between people who have not learned to communicate with each other, or to listen to each other, has become almost as important as our professional knowledge.

"Elective Villages"

[quoted from Brian Beedham in Resurgence *#174, in a review of* The Villagers *by Richard Critchfield (Anchor, 1994. $27.50), with acknowledgements to* The Economist.*]*

...Critchfield spent twenty-five years learning, and writing, about what makes people feel they belong together—about what the word "community" means.

...The first conclusion, on which he never wavered, was that villagers everywhere share something like a common culture. ...Critchfield's other conclusion was that, if this culture of villagers collapsed, the world would bitterly regret it. ...The village life that took shape around the world after the passing of the primal hunter-gatherer era was, at its best, a way of fitting self-interest into a recognition of other people's self-interest, into a sense of belonging together. If that were shattered, the consequent atomization of society would be explosive: as can already be seen, Critchfield argued, in any aspect of contemporary big-city life.

So, towards the end of his life, he began to hope that the idea of belonging together could be reconstructed in a new form in the post-village world. Perhaps men and women in cities and suburbs could begin to reassemble themselves into groups whose members will choose to define what is good for themselves in the context of what is good for others: a new sort of community, the "elective village."

...Critchfield was a liberal, a man who started with the necessity of individual freedom and loathed the imposition of authority. But he understood that liberalism does not stop with the assertion of individual freedom. It has to think about the ways in which these freedoms can live together.