

# 10 Good Reasons Why We Should All Live in Intentional Communities (and a few reasons why we don't)

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Just to be clear – when I use the term ‘intentional communities’ I use it to include communes, communities, eco-villages, co-housing projects and, of course, also Camphill communities. No two communities are the same and so what follows is a lot of generalisations and might reflect aspirations rather than daily reality. Nonetheless, there are hopefully enough general truths here to give a fair picture of what life is like (or at least could be like, or should be like) in intentional communities.

So, why should we all live in a community?

## 1. Because it's good for you

It seems that our sense of self-worth and well-being is inextricably linked to the feeling that we belong; that we are part of a group and part of something greater than ourselves. This sense of belonging allows us to feel acknowledged and recognised as who we truly are. This sense of belonging is very much part and parcel of being a member of an intentional community. In an intentional community we can also find meaning and purpose as part of a social setting that is positive and life-affirming. Through sharing lives on a daily basis we can also enjoy mutually supportive relationships that can be more trusting than usual. Intentional communities are busy places and there is a great variety of things to get involved in – socialising, work projects, sharing skills, meetings, and of course also fun and celebrations. And because today's intentional communities are generally more respectful of private space and time, it is perhaps easier to set personal boundaries and find a balance between the personal and the communal than it would have been previously.

## 2. Because it makes you a better person

Not necessarily – you will experience as much of the shadow side of yourself and the shadow side of others in any intentional community just as you would anywhere else. But nonetheless, there is an in-built expectation that you will become a better person and, in many cases, this is also the reality. Certainly it can be said that the ideals and values of a community are premised on you becoming a better and more ‘authentic’ person – more in tune with yourself, with others and with the world. This process of personal betterment might come about on hand of a conscious decision to begin to walk a path of inner development, or it might just happen by itself as one of the many benefits of community living. What makes this easier in an intentional community than elsewhere is that you are living in an environment that encourages talk of spirituality and personal transformation and some communities even run courses on a wide range of themes to do with spiritual, social and ecological, awareness.

And there is a good chance that, when the shadow side of human nature becomes all too obvious, there are other people around to share this with and support you through the process of learning to deal with it in a positive way.

Community is also a great place to learn – not just about yourself but a whole range of skills and knowledge. There are so many other people around with experience and wisdom to share and somehow it can be a safe place to make mistakes and grow in the process. Living in community requires that you develop extraordinary levels of acceptance, empathy and forgiveness. Alongside these trust is perhaps one of the most vital ingredients of communal living and if you don't experience this - or if you don't develop it - with those who you share your life with, then your experience of community will never be complete.

### **3. Because you can live an holistic lifestyle that is in tune with your values**

One of the most inspiring things about intentional communities is finding a way of life that makes it possible to live out your ideals and to put your beliefs and values into practice on a daily basis. Not only can you live out your passion but you can do it with a sense of integrity. Through being a member of a group of like-minded people who share the same set of values as you - compassion and co-operation, non-violence, social justice and care of the environment - you can enjoy a sense of wholeness, connectedness and integrity that is not so easily found elsewhere.

And for those fortunate enough to be able to derive a living from working within their own community (when many or most have to find a job outside to bring in the money) it also means that you live a lifestyle that has no real separation between your home, your family and your work. For some people it is almost the case that they find everything they need within their own community.

And if my experience of living in Camphill communities is anything to go by, you can also find a level of freedom and self-direction that is almost unimaginable anywhere else.

### **4. Because Rudolf Steiner said so**

Well, he didn't actually say it in so many words – in fact he didn't really say it at all.

Steiner's idea of 'community' was more about a group of people who come together for the purpose of esoteric study in order to collaborate with spiritual beings to prepare for the next epoch of the development of humanity and in this way to fulfil the potential of humanity on earth. And in this process of preparation humanity would transcend blood, racial and national ties and makes its enlightened way to the freedom of the individual. And in the next epoch of our development, having progressed from group consciousness to ego consciousness, we would finally arrive at the higher level of universal consciousness. In this future stage of our development, the well-being of the individual will depend upon the well-being of the whole. No individual will be able to be at peace if another individual somewhere else is suffering.

This will be the epoch of the universal community of humanity, and it seems obvious that living in an intentional community is the best possible way of getting in some practice for this.

The idea of humanity moving on to a new epoch in its development has been echoed by many New Age thinkers. The clue is in the title – ‘New Age’. The idea is that a new cultural epoch of humanity is emerging; that we are entering a New Age. Many people in intentional communities share the belief that we have moved beyond the Age of Tribalism, the Age of Empire and the Age of Individualism, and that we are now emerging into the New Age of the Earth Community. It has been called various things by various writers and is to be found in the work of Joanna Macy and David C Korten, who both term it ‘The Great Turning’. It can be found in Luigi Morelli’s ‘A Revolution of Hope’, in Don Beck and Chris Cowan’s ‘Spiral Dynamics’ and in Ken Wilber’s ‘Integral Vision’. So, as you can see, it wasn’t just Steiner.

## **5. Because Karl Konig said so**

Karl Konig did say explicitly that community is the prerequisite for curative education (as it was then known) and that community was to be the basis for the Camphill Movement. Konig said that one of the essentials of Camphill is the formation of a protective and supportive social environment for the child with special needs.

By this he meant a community of co-workers who dedicate their life to serve the needs of these children and the needs of their communities; who commit themselves to an inner path of self-development; who share their lives with the children and their fellow co-workers and who work for the love of their calling and not for financial remuneration.

Konig did not only say this but also worked his entire life to bring about communities where these principles could be put into practice. And, over 75 years later, time has shown that he was right – community is a very good social environment for (some, but not necessarily all) people with learning disabilities.

## **6. Because it’s a safe place to raise your children and to grow old**

Remember the African proverb? *‘It takes a whole village to raise a child’*. Living in an intentional community can be like living in a small village and, from the children’s’ viewpoint, like living in an extended family.

The ethos of an intentional community is all about mutual care and support and looking out for each other and this applies also to looking out for the community’s children. This means that children grow up in a wonderful, safe environment that is basically an open air playground and school. There are many tolerant adults around who are often happy to let the children join in what they are doing so the children get to meet a wide range of humanity and to learn a wide range of practical skills. In the process the children get to assimilate the values of the community. Hopefully they see how people share, how they communicate respectfully with each other, how they work through personal differences and make group decisions. As a result the children of communities often grow up wise beyond their years.

Within intentional communities you can find shared child care, community nurseries and kindergartens and even small community schools. There are games, common meals, parties and plenty of celebrations to join in with. Co-housing design is deliberately child friendly – the main thoroughfare is car-free, the kitchens of the houses have windows that look out onto play areas.

Despite all of this, the fact remains that differences in attitudes about how to bring up children seem to be the single most contentious issue for communities.

In addition, intentional communities can be good places to grow old. Many of them are filling up with older members who have spent their lives in service to their community and because less younger people are joining, the demography of community in general is tipping towards an ageing population. In fact there are many co-housing projects starting up, especially in the USA, for people to retire to, as a supportive community is seen as an attractive proposition for ageing baby boomers with plenty of money.

## **7. Because it's a better form of democracy**

Intentional communities aspire to being egalitarian, inclusive and participatory. And more often than not, the aspirations become reality. Intentional communities embrace governance and decision-making processes that are either based on basic consensus or a more refined form of it, such as Holocracy, Sociocracy or Social Permaculture.

They have tried and tested methods of facilitating group processes which are especially useful for mediation and conflict resolution when things get difficult. These include Worldwork, the Zegg Forum, Restorative Circles, Guided Facilitation, Dynamic Facilitation and Nonviolent Communication. Communities set great store on self-management - usually through delegated groups and decentralised decision-making, although the ultimate back stop to all of this is often the community-wide forum.

The price you pay for this high level of participation and involvement might well be countless and endless meetings but the benefit is that you have the possibility and indeed the right to have your say on all the issues that directly affect your everyday life. Where else can you find such a direct form of democracy at work on an everyday basis?

## **8. Because it's a better form of economics**

Just as democracy has been put to work, refined and made more immediate and effective in the micro-society of an intentional community, so too with economics.

Over time various economic models have been trialled in communities - from a fully shared and collective economy to private enterprise and combinations of each.

Despite the fact that the economy of an intentional community can never be completely separate from the mainstream financial system, communities can nonetheless experiment with their own small scale internal arrangements in which the producers, traders and consumers all have a much more direct and interdependent relationship with each other. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), which first emerged in intentional communities, is an obvious example of this.

And the values of these economic systems reflect the ethos and principles of community. Trading systems are based on co-operation, mutual benefit and the common good. Land and property are often held in common ownership. Cars, tools and other assets are often pooled and the passion, energy, abilities, knowledge, skills and time of members are freely shared for the good of all. Personal fulfilment, the welfare of each member and the benefit of the group are considered to be more important than economic success or personal financial benefit.

Communities encourage people to re-evaluate sufficiency and to move away from consumerism towards voluntary simplicity. They also expect their members to make contributions to the community as a condition of their membership, whether it be a share of communal duties such as, cooking, cleaning, showing visitors round, or attending meetings and taking up positions in the governance structures. These work contributions might be unpaid or they might be logged as labour credits in an overall scheme of work quotas. Some communities allow members to make a payment to community funds in lieu of work.

Communities that have a shared economy might operate a system of a guaranteed annual income for each person – either based on individual need or a standard amount for each person.

In addition, some intentional communities operate a Local Exchange Trading System (LETS) which match up people offering goods and services with those who need them. People can negotiate the value of these goods or services and pay for them through barter and exchange or through the community's own internal currency. The beauty of an internal currency in terms of community-building is that the more local the circulation of money, the stronger the social and ecological relationships

Through sharing resources and sharing work community members have more time for other things that are not just about making ends meet - things such as community celebrations, common work projects, networking with the wider community movement and involvement in social justice causes.

It must be said, however, that although sharing means that the living costs in a community can be much cheaper than it would be otherwise, this is offset by the high 'buy-in' costs of joining a community – either building, buying or renting a house.

Although the tendency in communities has been to move away from a collective economy to something more like private enterprise, nonetheless the shared values, the cohesion and the immediacy of face-to-face economic relationships in an intentional community allow people to experience economic systems that work for their benefit, for the benefit of others and for the benefit of the whole community.

## **9. Because it's good for the environment.**

As the New Age of Earth Community begins to make itself felt we humans begin to develop a heightened respect for Nature and a deeper awareness of how the activities of human beings are destroying the balance of the biosphere. Through an understanding of the Gaia paradigm, we begin to appreciate the way in which our anthropocentric thinking has disrupted the natural complex and self-regulating systems that support our life on this planet.

For many reasons intentional communities, with their universal worldview, their commitment to living lightly, their access to land and resources and the accumulated wisdom of shared knowledge and skills gained from their participation in the global ecological movement, are ideal settings in which to trial and showcase innovative green technologies and practices.

These technologies and practices include such things as solar, wind and bioreactor energy; heating through geothermal and photovoltaic systems; district heating; recycling and upcycling; natural sewage treatment systems; grey water recycling systems and compost toilets. House design includes passive house, straw bale and earth ship houses. Co-housing design incorporates an integrated planning design that means that the houses are clustered together in order to enhance energy efficiency and other areas are set aside for non-development and habitat restoration. Horticulture and agriculture follow organic, bio-dynamic or permaculture principles.

It has been shown that, as a result of the relatively high concentration of people who share resources and the implementation of ecological design and green technologies, the ecological footprint of an ecovillage is well below that of a conventional lifestyle.

Integral to the design and planning of today's intentional communities is the promotion of economic systems that take into account ecological considerations. This is known as 'Environmental Full Cost Accounting' (EFCA) in which all the true costs of production and consumption, such as extraction, remediation, processing, energy use, transport, and disposal are taken into account.

Intentional communities are often members of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) and the wider movement of Transition Towns – grass root community projects that aim to increase resilience and sustainability in the face of climate change and peak oil.

The 'intentional' in the term 'intentional community' and the 'eco' in the term 'ecovillage' covers, among other things, the goal to create human scale settlements that are socially, economically and ecologically sustainable.

Maybe it's already too late and maybe not enough people are going to be doing this to make a difference – but that's no reason not to try. It all goes back to living a lifestyle that is in tune with your values.

## **10. Because it's the best way of making this world a better place**

There have always been people who step out of mainstream society and declare that they have found a better way of living and that once others can see how successful they are then slowly the whole world will follow their example and we will all be saved. A new age of peace, harmony and universal brotherhood will be ushered in.

Numerous intentional communities have come and gone over the years, each new one building on what went before. While the dream has not yet been realised, nonetheless, within a sheltered social setting, somewhat separate from mainstream society, where people share similar values and worldviews and are to some extent free to make up their own rules, intentional communities have become places of experimentation in which alternative prototypes for a better society are modelled.

Intentional communities have been called 'social laboratories'. Some of society's better ideas were first tried out and refined in historical intentional communities. The list of these ideas and values is impressive and includes the abolition of slavery, many aspects of social justice and social welfare, the co-operative movement, universal education, women's' rights and, more recently, environmental and ecological sustainability.

Today's intentional communities have taken the lead in social group processes, conflict resolution, alternative energy systems, ecological design of buildings, landscape preservation and restoration, and a wide range of tools and techniques for resilience, self-reliance and a sustainable future.

There are promising signs. Green technologies are now being scaled up by commercial companies for wider use. Green technologies and new social and economic process are being scaled up beyond intentional communities to geographical communities both by the Global Ecovillage Network and the Transition Towns movement. Yet even though the new green paradigm that was first trialled in communities is being taken up by more and more people, the idea of actually living in an intentional community has not caught on. Nonetheless, until that time comes, they remain one of best places for incubating, developing and showcasing ideas for a better world.

So, if living in community is such a good choice, why do we not all live in intentional communities?

### **1. Because people don't want to give up their autonomy**

Despite the fact that we are meant to move on beyond egoism the fact remains that we still have an innate predisposition to put our own interests to the fore. We don't like other people telling us what to do and we don't appreciate it when we can't get our own way. And in community, more than in normal society, there are a lot of expectations of what you should and should not do and a good amount of pressure to conform. There is no doubt that every aspect of your behaviour is under public scrutiny more than is normal and that you are made to feel accountable to the 'common good' – whatever that is. It all comes back again to the old conundrum about the balance between the individual and the community but the expectation is always going to be that the community comes first.

But this just leads to a further conundrum - who is the community apart from other people? And who are these people? And how come they get to decide what I can do and and and .....(and so it goes on).

**2. Because other people do your head in.**

Well, they do, don't they?

**3. Because it's too exclusive**

One of the attractions of intentional communities is that they are open and inclusive. However, this is not always the case. The truth is that the members of today's intentional communities are predominantly white, upper-middle class, well-educated, well-off, liberal-minded people from privileged backgrounds. It seems that community is seldom an option for people who are poor, come from deprived backgrounds or from ethnic minorities. This might be because these people wish to better themselves in life rather than to choose voluntary poverty and wish for more control of their lives rather than to submit to collective decision-making. It also seems that younger people in general are less attracted to a communal lifestyle than previously and this, coupled with the cost of buying into a community lifestyle, means that, as we have already seen, intentional communities have an increasingly ageing population.

Although this causes a good deal of regret and soul-searching within the intentional communities movement it is not actually surprising. It has been shown that people tend to want to be around others who are similar to themselves in age, class, and outlook. This sense of cohesion and commonality is fundamental to the experiences of community. So, yes, intentional communities can be somewhat exclusive. Yet, while this might appear to be a shortcoming, it might also be a strength.

**4. Because it's really hard work**

All too often intentional communities have been regarded as escapist enclaves for utopian idealists. While this might be true, what is all too often overlooked is the effort involved in living closely with people over a long period and the frustration and disappointment experienced when trying to sustain idealism in the face of day to day reality.

Communities are great places – good for your health and good for your sense of well-being. But they can also be bad for you. The balance and boundaries between the public and private can be difficult to sustain and people can find themselves overworked and overwhelmed by so much to do and nowhere to hide.

It can be great to be so involved with all the various aspects of community life but the never-ending stream of community issues and concerns and things that need to be sorted start to wear you down. There are endless meetings and decision-making can be difficult and laborious. Power struggles and interpersonal difficulties can sometimes make a community seem less than the idyllic arcadia that people might suppose. And even though it might seem somewhat ironic, some people can at times feel very lonely and isolated even though surrounded by others.

Many people find themselves in difficult and stressful life situations and, while it might appear from the outside that a communal life is an easy way out, anyone who has lived in a community will know that this is not the case. Community life is rewarding, fulfilling, and inspiring, but it's also hard work.

### **A Concluding Thought**

If we human beings are really to move forward into a new epoch of our cultural development in which we have a heightened awareness and sense of responsibility both for our fellow human beings and for our natural environment -

If we are really going to try and avoid the premature destruction of the biosphere – our only life support system - and learn to live in harmony with Nature -

If we really want to live in a society based on respect, co-operation, individual self-development and a positive sense of social responsibility and social justice –

If a better world really is possible and we want to try and bring it about -

Then - despite all the failings and shortcomings and despite all the frustration and hard work involved - where better to begin to learn and practice all of this than in an intentional community?