

Grass Root Communities as the Heart of Green Citizenship

As citizens we are finally waking to the perils of our damage to the earth. However, our new consciousness is dragged down into inaction by isolation, cynicism and depression. This can occur when an individual is given responsibility disproportionate to his or her capacity to act constructively. It is too much to expect each individual to hold in isolation the energy to act radically and sustainably for the earth. We need the support of others to challenge the gaps between awareness and action. We have been socialised to live essentially private lives within impersonal worlds. We are largely devoid of the experience of intimate sharing beyond family whether of feelings, friends, flesh or possessions.

Acting sustainably is dependent upon being part of a culture that sets the frame within which environmental decisions flow: a culture where environmental norms are embedded within our psyches and which set the range of options to explore.

As a society we have over-reacted to the oppressive individualism of the tribes and villages of our history. In times of radical challenge to our ways of living, community development is one of the core political and cultural pathways forward. Green technology is laudable but insufficient, needing the structures of grass root communities to maximize its efficiencies. For example, five people sharing an energy-efficient light versus one.

One of the core pathways for sustainability is regeneration of cities as clusters of villages. Community however has become a motherhood word

largely devoid of meaning as well as its constituent culture and skills. Its regeneration is an essential strategy for human empowerment to tackle societies' restructuring. Community can provide the context of support for challenge to ingrained patterns resistant to transformation after 200 years of the god of economic growth. We need community; it's our heritage of being human, vital to help radically reduce our footprint and to heal the human spirit. Virtual connections can only substitute so much and deepening relations with just one other is also insufficient.

There have been numerous waves of experiments with intentional communities at times of crisis. I joined this search in the 1970s with many others. What I have so far learned from 35 years' experience of intentional community living is that collective strength comes from clarity of shared purpose. This can be sustained through organisational structures backed up by social pressure for individuals to participate and carry out their agreed tasks, with clear lines of responsibility and areas of authority. People may choose to join or to leave, but there need to be real community boundaries that limit the scope of diversity in order to ensure community cohesion.

A cohesive community is unlikely to emerge if its members do not subscribe to a system of common values. While core values need to be shared, the community structures need to allow for diversity. The security of the organization is a requisite for the evolution of constructive informal community dynamics. The naive vision of the simple life and self-sufficiency has often suppressed the capacity to develop and affirm the complex interdependencies of retribalisation. Community identity and sustainability need cultural features such as rituals and symbols, which become sacred. Many sustainability seekers reject corporate bureaucracy. Nevertheless, the development of clarity of form and function is a

necessary first step towards the development of cultural features. It takes a long time to rediscover and to evolve appropriate shared realms of the sacred that nourish the community and sustain it during crisis.

Even with careful planning it is inevitable that the establishment phase of any social group, especially innovative groups, are characterised by a period of uncertainty and psycho/social trauma, with membership turnover and community failure.

Getting established is hard enough. When communities fall apart or explode, this is often attributed to interpersonal conflict. It is vital to develop appropriate community mechanisms to distinguish symptom from cause, person from issue. What is needed is the shared will and knowledge to make decisions about when and how to facilitate the creative use of the energy of conflict.

At its heart community means shared bonding with a particular group of people in a particular place. Retribalisation from our present cultural base will involve struggle, pain, letting go and reaching out. In our culture we don't know what 21st century tribalisation means and we therefore have so much to learn from other cultures that have a long experience of tribal village living.

Much can also be learnt from the longevity of religious communities.

Whether their extremes of collective accountability and communal organisation are necessary for other communities is another matter. A transcendental community commitment of a spiritual, environmental and/or

political nature is necessary for sustainability. At the very least communities need to be accountable to a larger body politic.

To survive and live fully, a community needs to believe in the social necessity of conflict while recognising that it has to be used creatively to generate new possibilities. If the community is so organised that it lacks room for change or the stimulus of uncertainty then boredom is the inevitable result. For example, Moora Moora Cooperative survives in part because it cannot be managed by an individual, is unpredictable and at times disorganized. Its elements of chaos are a threat to the organizing mind and yet they may at least sometimes be part of our sustainability. However, 'the tragedy of the commons' is a more real threat. There is a need for a number of dynamic balances between the community's inner and outer life, consensus and dissent, self-sufficiency and community interdependence, personal desires and community interests.

Participation in a community requires some sacrifice of individual autonomy to achieve the benefits of connectedness. This involves bonds, obligations and mutual interdependence, which are fundamentally incompatible with individualism. Australian society has opted for the 'freedom' of individualism and, as a result, has denied itself community. In contrast, authoritarian regimes whether of the State and of some religious orders opt for the extreme of collective power. Finding a dynamic balance between personal autonomy and community commitment is essential to an understanding of the present struggle within intentional communities and also within our culture.

The explosion of experiments in intentional communities in the 1970s throughout the western world is now finding new expression in the 21st

century. It is as much driven by necessity as by utopian dreaming. Intentional communities as well as inherited familial village or tribal bonds can be a place and web of relations that can resist the extremes of individualism; the monopoly power of corporations and institutionalised professionals. Such communities in all their diversity can be a place of participatory democracy that breeds powerful individuals educated in the practice of deep green citizenship.

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