Visions of Utopia: Experiments in Sustainable Culture

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Intentional Communities: Today's Social Laboratories
By Geoph Kozeny

Today many people are looking for ways to bring more community into their lives. Ordinary people with extraordinary visions tell their stories of living and working together to build a better world.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the word "community" has become a buzzword used to conjure up images of togetherness, cooperation, well being, and a sense of belonging. The primal feeling evoked is that a community is a safe haven--a place where everyone looks after each other, where everyone feels at home, where everyone's needs are met.

Today a lot of people are saying "I want more of a sense of community in my life"--and this craving is evident in all walks of life. I hear it from the middle class, from working class folks, upwardly mobile young professionals, singles, couples, with or without children, students about to graduate, and senior citizens. Although it's not widely known, there are many practical examples of real-life communities to chose from. In fact, I'm about to take you on a tour of a number of groups which have made the everyday practice of community a central focus in their lives. Though only a fraction of the total population, these and similar groups are important to society because of the pioneering work they do in figuring out how to cooperate, share resources, and live sustainably. While it's unlikely that everyone everywhere will choose to live collectively or own property with others, we all stand to benefit from what these cultural pioneers are learning about how to live in peace and harmony. These groups of idealists, brought together in pursuit of shared values and common goals, are known as "intentional communities."

Now, most people are surprised to learn that a majority of today's "unique new ideas" about living in community are neither new, nor unique--they only seem so because the stories are seldom covered in history texts or discussed in the daily

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news. For many, "intentional community" is synonymous with the hippie communes of the '60s, but that notion is extremely misleading--the '60's communes were just one large blip in a long and impressive history of intentional communities. The fact is, efforts to create new lifestyles based on lofty ideals have been with us for thousands of years.

Although the earliest humans are thought to have lived in clans or tribes, they were probably just "doing what came natural" rather than consciously designing a social structure. However, by the 6th Century BC, Buddha's followers began living in ashrams--communities intentionally designed to foster an orderly, productive, spiritual life. Community, also known as the "sangha," is one of Buddhism's core teachings, and represents the most longstanding form of intentional community on record.

In the 4th Century BC, the philosopher Plato penned his now famous "Republic" which explored the nature of justice and criticized the institutions of the society he lived in. In his make-believe society--governed by benevolent philosopher-kings-- Plato imagined what an ideal world might look like, and how it might function.

Meanwhile in North America, the indigenous tribal communities were flourishing under communal traditions handed down over many centuries. By the 1500s, the five major tribes in the Northeast had joined together to form the Iroquois Confederacy--the first democratic union of sovereign republics. Cooperating as equals, the five-tribe federation featured a constitution; freedom of religion; provisions for initiative, referendum, and recall; and a system of checks and balances—all innovations that two centuries later appeared in the U.S. Articles of Confederation and the Constitution.

In 1516, Sir Thomas More coined the term "Utopia" to describe an ideal human society. According to historian Lewis Mumford, More derived the word from two Greek terms, creating a clever pun meaning both "no place" and "good place"-- implying that "Utopia" was simultaneously the epitome of human folly and the ultimate in human hope. Typical of utopian literature, More criticized the society he was living in, and offered an idealistic alternative featuring few laws, beautiful surroundings, short work days, universal education, and a democratic government selected by lottery from among the best-educated citizens.

Although "Utopia" is traditionally thought of as an imaginary place, history is full of examples of real people attempting to create new societies to improve the status quo. In fact, that's what all intentional communities throughout history have in common: each is based on a vision of a better world, and a commitment to live in a way where everyday actions reflect the stated goals. And since new communities are typically formed in response to something seen as wrong or lacking in the

contemporary culture, it should come as no surprise that their members, and especially their leaders, are often seen as rebels, misfits, or even outlaws.

However, in spite of their criticisms of the status quo, most intentional communities that have withstood the test of time have eventually become accepted and well respected by their neighbors. With that in mind, here's a brief overview of some of the better-known intentional communities that have flourished over the last 2000 years…

Essenes [2nd Century BC]

The Essenes lived in communities based on simple living, extensive sharing, and nonviolence. Many scholars believe that Christ studied with the Essenes before he began his ministry, and Essenes were probably the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Early Christians [1st Century AD]

After Christ, early Christians banded together in "communities of goods" as described in the book of Acts, which says that all who believed were together, and shared all things in common based on individual need.

Christian Monasteries [340 AD]

The first Christian monasteries, with shared prayer, worship, study, and work, provided a religious life sheltered from the distractions of the secular world. In the 4th century, with an emphasis on "service," monks in St. Basil's Order opened public hospitals, hospices, schools, & orphanages.

Anabaptists [1525]

Some early Anabaptists, most notably the Hutterites, lived in communities with all possessions held in common. Over the years, several denominations were formed based on differing interpretations of the same core beliefs. Many of these, including the Hutterites, Mennonites, and Amish, are still thriving today.

Puritan Colonies [1620]

Puritans crossed the Atlantic seeking religious freedom, and at Plymouth Rock they signed the Mayflower Compact--the colony's first written code of self-government. The Puritans were very creative, originating many things that we now take for granted, including the town meeting, elementary schools, and compulsory public education.

The Diggers [1649-1650]

The Diggers were British commoners who revolted against the nobility, communally occupying & cultivating Crown land to make it available to the poor. Harassed by legal actions and mob violence, they dispersed after only one year.

Shakers in America [1774]
The Shakers came to America seeking religious freedom, focusing on simplicity, purity, and perfection in their work. By the 1830s, there were 19 Shaker Colonies with 5,000 members. Today, only one colony remains. The Shakers, still known for their elegantly simple furniture design, were also prolific inventors, coming up with ideas for such useful items as propellers, waterwheels, threshing machines, clothespins, and the packaging & selling of seeds.

New Harmony [1824-1828]
Robert Owen's New Harmony was to be a cooperative village where all citizens would own the property in common and share labor equally, with no classes, no division of labor, and no crime. Owen's ideas led to widespread reform in labor and education, both in America and abroad, and New Harmony operated one of the first public libraries.

Nashoba [1825-1828]
Appalled by slavery, Frances Wright bought land in rural Tennessee to establish Nashoba, a community for emancipating slaves by teaching them life skills and helping them earn their own sale price. When the settlement collapsed three years later, Wright emancipated the slaves and paid for their transportation to Haiti.

Brook Farm [1841-1847]
Brook Farm was based on cooperative living, education, and self-reliance. The intellectual life there was stimulating, attracting Nathaniel Hawthorne, and regular visits from the likes of Horace Greeley and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who later wrote about having many collective schemes for a better social organization that would promote the development of our physical, intellectual, and moral natures.

Oneida Community [1848-1881]
John Humphrey Noyes founded Oneida with a focus on work, education, recreation, and Bible study … a model members hoped would spread worldwide. They owned all property in common, and practiced "complex marriage," where each adult was married to every adult of the opposite sex. Oneida lasted for 33 years, with membership peaking at 300 members.

Amana Colonies [1855]
German Protestants established seven Amana Colonies in Iowa, owning all land and buildings in common, and requiring that all members work at assigned tasks in the kitchens, fields, factories, or shops. In 1932, after 90 years, members of the Amana Colonies voted to end their communal lifestyle.

Fairhope, Alabama [1894]
The town of Fairhope, Alabama, founded in 1894 by a group of creative, independent thinkers, was based on the Single Tax Theory proposed by economist Henry George. Instead of owning the land privately, members received 99-year leases and paid no taxes other than their land use fees, which were sufficient to fund the local government and pay for all amenities such as schools, sewers, roads, and a community art center.

Degania [1910]
Degania, founded in 1910, was Israel's first kibbutz. Their model, supported by the Zionist movement, was used to pioneer many facets of the Jewish national revival. Degania's innovative economy--a mixture of agriculture and industry--is still thriving. Today some 270 kibbutzim are home to about 2% of Israel's population.

Gould Farm [1913]
Gould Farm, founded in 1913, provides a family-like community environment where the mentally ill can learn to live meaningful lives. Any family willing to be involved can obtain care there for a family member. With caregivers and caretakers working side by side, Gould Farm has become an internationally recognized prototype for psychiatric rehabilitation.

Inter-Cooperative Council (ICC) [1932]
In 1932, grad students needing affordable housing bought the first of the Inter-Cooperative Council's 20 student housing co-ops. Each house is self-managed and democratically run. In the late '80s, the ICC helped establish the Campus Cooperative Development Corporation which creates student housing co-ops in the U.S. & Canada.

Catholic Workers [1933]
The Catholic Worker movement was founded in 1933 by Dorothy Day & Peter Maurin to serve the needy and provide hospitality for the homeless. Several years later they also began work to raise public consciousness through political agitation, nonviolent resistance, and voluntary poverty.

Today there are over 140 Catholic Worker communities committed to serving the needy and promoting peace.

Greenbelt, Maryland [**1937**]
In 1937, Greenbelt, Maryland was opened as the first "new town" in FDR's "New Deal" program. The 885 low-income families worked together to create a town government and develop all necessary community services. It was said that "No one could live in Greenbelt a week without becoming a member of at least one committee."

Koinonia Partners [1942]
Koinonia Partners, an interracial Christian farming community, was founded in 1942 by preacher Clarence Jordan to promote reconciliation between whites and blacks. Koinonia developed the idea of "partnership housing," where the poor worked side by side with volunteers to build new, affordable homes. In 1976, Habitat for Humanity was founded on the "partnership housing" model pioneered at Koinonia.

Mitraniketan [1956] "Mi-TRA-ni-KAY-tun"
Mitraniketan is a non-political, non-sectarian rural educational community, established in India in 1956 to develop the whole individual, to improve the lives of nearby villagers, and to offer a replicable model for Third World countries. Mitraniketan's initiatives have led to significant local developments in village industries, agriculture, health care, & education.

Yamagishi Association [1957]
In 1957, the first of the Yamagishi cooperative communities was founded in Japan to bring about a sustainable, harmonious society. Rooted in large-scale agriculture and industry, they pursue a non-religious and non-political philosophy--relying on science and human intelligence to provide programs in health care, education, and social welfare. Today there are 40 Yamagishi communities, ranging in size from 20 to 1600 members.

Findhorn Foundation [1962]
Findhorn, founded in 1962, became a center for education and transformation in the '70s, working to create a sustainable lifestyle that combines spirituality, ecology, and economics with rich cultural and social experiences. Since then, several hundred people with a wide range of interests have moved into the area to take part in an "open community" working together to create a cooperative culture. Famous for its organic gardens, ecological buildings, and natural sewage treatment systems, Findhorn is also an NGO recognized by the United Nations.

Cohousing [1964]
"Cohousing," originating in Denmark in 1964, features self-contained private dwellings and extensive common facilities. Designed and managed by the residents, most cohousing communities have 20 to 30 single family homes on a pedestrian street or courtyard. In a typical week, residents share several optional group meals in the common house. In North America today there are more than 50 occupied cohousing communities.

Intentional Communities in the '60s & '70s
The "Summer of Love" in 1967 gave rise to thousands of hippie communes in a movement that sent ripples around the world. At the same time, and over the following decade, there were also thousands of new intentional communities started based on other visionary ideals including: spirituality, simple living, affordable housing, social activism, and sustainability. Most did not last five years.

Ecovillages [1984]
The first "ecovillages," evolved from the cohousing model, appeared in Europe in the early '80s, emphasizing a lifestyle that was environmentally and socially sustainable. By the mid '90s there were prototypes on five continents, and today there are several thousand self-identified ecovillages worldwide, with many intentional communities re-designing themselves based on the ecovillage model.

Of the 25 groups described above, it's interesting to note that all but four were started before 1960, and all but six are either still in existence, or have descendent communities that continue today. Most have changed substantially over the years, and I encourage you to keep that in mind as you watch: Think of each segment as "a snapshot" where most of the images--the people, the buildings, the activities, even the goals--are subject to change. As you're about to see, sometimes those changes can be quite dramatic.

Occasionally, major changes do happen overnight, but it's far more common for the large shifts to unfold over years or even over decades. For example, I've visited at least a dozen communities, started mostly by folks in their twenties, that were politically radical in their early years, yet within two decades the members--by then in their forties--had shifted their focus to issues such as improving their children's education, worrying about health concerns, and making plans for their old age.

There's a full range of ages among the people living in communities--from newborn, to those well into their nineties--however there's a disproportionate clump of well-educated folks ranging in age from 25 to 50-something. Likewise, the level of affluence in intentional communities runs the gamut from ghetto poverty, to suburban middle class, to quite well off. The mix of nuclear families, single-parent families, and singles is roughly proportionate to what you'd find in the mainstream, and recently there's been a surge in the number of people over 50 looking for community for the first time.

Though most people are drawn to communities by the vision of a better and more fulfilling life, the reality is that we all have roots in the prevailing culture, and every one of us brings along some baggage from our upbringing. In any close-knit environment, our egos, prejudices, and unresolved hurts will inevitably surface, and will need to be faced--sooner or later. So if you hear a glowing report about a "perfect" community somewhere--one with no rough edges--assume that you're not getting the whole story.

Any culture, whether traditional or alternative, is going to have conflict--disagreement backed by strong feelings. In mainstream culture, conflict tends to be handled so poorly that most of us have learned to dread and avoid it--hence we also learn very little about how to work with it effectively. One of the exciting things being explored in intentional communities is how to work constructively with conflict, using it to gain insight into who we are and what we can be.

Back in the late '80s, when I began my odyssey traveling among intentional communities, I already had 16 years of experience living in communities, and naively believed I knew which systems worked best, and which ones were oppressive or ineffective. Surprisingly, in my travels I've found healthy examples of almost every imaginable kind of government, decision-making process, and economic system--ranging from the anarchistic, to the cooperative, to the hierarchic--including benevolent dictators. However, I've also seen examples of each that are dysfunctional and disempowering. There are two simple questions to check for what matters most: Do the members whole-heartedly believe in the system they're using, and are they participating with enthusiasm? No amount of theory, dogma, or peer pressure can substitute for clarity of vision, open mindedness, good communication, the spirit of cooperation, common sense, and plain old hard work.

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Now that we've looked at the history of intentional communities and I've outlined a few of the basics, here are some modern real-life examples--described in the words of the communities themselves. Though none of these groups has reached a level of perfection that would qualify them as being a "utopia" I invite you to witness the integrity of their visions, and be inspired by what they've accomplished.

Featured Communities [10-minute Segments]

1961 Camphill Special Schools (PA)
1967 Twin Oaks (VA)
1978 Purple Rose Collective (CA)
1969 Ananda Village (CA)
1977 Breitenbush Hot Springs (OR)
1992 Earthaven Ecovillage (NC)
1993 Nyland Cohousing (CO)

As you've just seen, today's intentional communities are melting pots of ideals and issues that have been in the public spotlight over many decades:, including civil rights, women's liberation, peace activism, sustainable agriculture, alternative energy, and now health and aging. Most of these groups focus on several of the areas, and each community creates a blend unique to its own identity. In fact, in all of my travels, I have yet to find two communities that are identical.

Being noticeably different from most of their neighbors, intentional communities are often thought to operate on the fringes of mainstream culture. However, the everyday values and priorities of community folks and mainstream folks are surprisingly similar, such as:

• Providing a stable home and good education for children,
• Finding meaningful and satisfying work,
• Living in a safe neighborhood,
• Enjoying a pollution-free environment, and, for many,
• Pursuing a spiritual path that provides a context for the other goals and a basis for making decisions in times of uncertainty.

The big difference is that people drawn to intentional communities are not satisfied with the status quo, and want to improve on what past generations have accomplished. Their members are out there every day,

rolling up their sleeves and exploring new possibilities. Intentional communities are, essentially, testing grounds for new ideas about how to live better, more satisfying lives … lives that actualize our untapped human potential in a way that's environmentally and socially sustainable.

And one final caution: History is full of examples of starry-eyed dreamers who have attempted to "live in community"--only to discover that the reality is challenging, hard work. Many have retreated from the idea, convinced that it's naively idealistic and unworkable. However, for those who can see the bigger picture--that community living will always push us to grow toward our greater potential--the rewards will far outweigh any frustrations encountered along the path.

Ultimately, community should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a tool for how we organize our lives. Being social animals who crave our own kind and want a sense of connection, we need better models for how to get along. Hopefully the examples I've shared will serve as an inspiration for what's possible. I invite you to pick from among the many ideas presented, mixing and matching them to suit your own needs and interests--so that you can access a greater sense of community in your own life, and make the world a better place.