Cooperative Living in the 21st Century
by
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I suspect that some of the characteristics that the academic community attribute to an intentional community have been influenced by the Hippie communal movement of the mid 20th century. I refer to this as a movement since it basically follows some dictionary definitions that refer to a movement as the activity of a group toward the achievement of a goal. Of course the goal of the Hippie commune was quite varied, and ranged from tuning in, turning on, and dropping out, to a sincere effort to create a better society through cooperative living. I would like to focus on two characteristics that have been proposed for an intentional community. The first is that the members of the community believe that they are in some way unique, and their mission, or philosophy sets them apart from the rest of society. This was certainly the case with the Hippie communes, and their adoption of the term “counterculture” not only signified that they were outside of mainstream society, but also implied that they rejected this society. The second feature of an intentional community is that the group must be gathered on the basis of a common goal or purpose, and this must go beyond simply living together. This common goal is seen as the unifying factor that was the intent for the formation of the community. ¹

My research into some of the 21st century intentional communities in California has made me wonder if the people starting these communities were aware of the defining criteria they should be following. They seem to be breaking the rules, or perhaps they are just following in the tradition of communaritarians and ignoring the rules. Of course, caution should be taken in making generalizations about all intentional communities on the basis of a sample of California communities. However, California has some claim for being the hub of intentional community activity in the United States, and for setting trends in cooperative living. This was certainly the case in the 1960s with the eruption of the Hippie communes that occurred in California. According to the Fellowship for Intentional Community, ² a half a century later, California leads the nation in the number of intentional communities with 227. In fact, the west coast is a focal point of cooperative living with the second-most number of communities in Washington with 102, and in third place is Oregon with 92 communities.

Among the new features that I see emerging in California intentional communities
is a rejection of the belief that they are in some way outside, or apart from the rest of society. Although the sample of communities I have visited is small, I do not see a counterculture attitude that rejects society. Instead, what I see among 21st century communities is a trend to meld with society. Stephanie Smith, a Santa Monica, California, architect, who proposed a way for people living in cul-de-sacs to engage in communal living, expressed this view in a National Public Radio interview in 2009.³

In the past . . . people who started them (communities) have really insisted that the best way is to leave your old community, leave society, leave culture, and start over, . . . what we are interested in doing is make them (communities) effective as part of a culture, not a counterculture this time.

A statement on the web site of Los Angeles community HMS Possibility, echos Stephanie Smith's remarks.

We are committed to bringing cooperative living to a mainstream audience.⁴

Maybe the 21st century communutarians feel that the way to spread the concept of cooperative living is not from the outside, as was the approach of the counterculture communities, but from the inside, by making intentional communities part of society.

To one member of an intentional community, this has already occurred. During my visit to Mothership Sanctuary, an intentional community outside Eugene, Oregon, I had an interesting conversation with Omni Mountainstarrainbow, founder of the community. Omni, who was involved in the Hippie communal movement of the 1960s and 70s, believes that these communes were successful in attaining the goals they were trying to achieve. The alternative lifestyles they were practicing, such as organic foods, non-polluting forms of energy, new sexual attitudes, and more, are now becoming widespread in American society. Anyone who desires this lifestyle does not have to join a commune to find it.

“All of the needs that required going off and starting alternative systems are now established in the greater world and available to anyone who searches.”⁵

There is evidence that the “Us vs. Them” attitude that made intentional communities feel outside the mainstream of society is dissipating. Time will tell if this is just a variation.
on a long established pattern of intentional communities being apart from society, or if this is the beginning of a new pattern.

Finally, I would like to examine why people gather into an intentional community. What is their intent? We know that as a group they share a common vision or purpose, and this can range from a religious belief, a philosophy, or a common goal like living in harmony with the environment, or providing a service. I have recently become aware that there may be another reason why people are drawn to cooperative living. In 2009, on the HopeDance web site, there is an article titled, “Why is this woman leaving the central coast to move into an intentional community in Northern California?” It is about a middle aged, single, woman named Debra, who is selling her home in an urban area, and has decided to move to an intentional community. In giving the reason why she has made this decision, Debra says;

*I will grow much more as a person by challenging myself in a completely new environment. Making decisions by consensus, sharing part of my living space with different people, working on projects together, being there for each other in good and bad times, all sounds wonderfully inviting to me.*

If this statement is analyzed it does not reflect the usual reasons why people are drawn to a community. There is no mention of the purpose, or mission of this community, or how this coincides with her personal philosophy. What is inviting to Debra, and attracted her to this community, is the way decisions are made, being with different people, working together, and mutual support. It is not the underlying reason why the community was established that is important, but the way it functions by cooperative living, and how this will help her grow as a person. Her motivation for moving is group living, not the purpose or vision of the community.

This made me wonder how many other people are attracted to intentional communities because of cooperative living? Debra’s statement reminded me of a conversation that I had with Richard at Ellis Island, a community in Los Angeles, and his comment on living in an intentional community.

*Unlike living alone, or with a nuclear family, group living produces an evolution in an individual where they gain more understanding of another's feelings, and become more socially aware.*
Those of us who study cooperative living have always thought that intentional communities were built around a mission, and cooperative living was one of the ways this mission could be achieved. But what if learning how to live cooperatively, to work together and to share, was the mission? What if the goal of the community was to help people gain more understanding of another’s feelings, and become more socially aware? I suspect that this is what Debra is looking for, and it may be at the core of the new coliving movement. On the coliving.org web site coliving is defined as;

*A modern, urban lifestyle that values openness, sharing, and collaboration.*

Perhaps the mission of an intentional community is not something on a grand scheme, like fostering a religious belief, or creating a new social order or utopia. Maybe in the 21st century is it just learning how to live together in harmony. Two of the lessons that developed out of the counterculture communities were how to resolve conflicts, and consensus decision making. There are tested ways that people can learn to live together, so the blueprints are there for starting communities whose mission is to Learn to Live Cooperatively.

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Footnotes

1. Both of these characteristics have been proposed as defining attributes of an intentional community by Timothy Miller, and are outlined in detail in his article, “A Matter of Definition: Just What is an Intentional Community?”, In, Communal Societies, Volume 30, No. 1, pp.1-15.

2. See the Fellowship for Intentional Community web site, ic.org, under Communities Directory.


4. This statement appeared under “Community Description” in the Communities Directory Section of the Fellowship For Intentional Community’s web site, ic.org, and was copied on July 18, 2016.

5. This quote by Omni Mountaintairainbow was put in an essay that she wrote after my visit. It was included in a chapter titled, “Developmental Communalism into the Twenty-First Century” by Donald E. Pitzer, in The Communal Idea in the 21st Century edited by Eliezer Ben-Rafael, Yaacov Oved and Menachem Topel. Leiden, Brill 2013

6. This article is on the HopeDance web site hopedance.org/home/soul-news/950-738