

# Summer Readings



Lutheran Volunteer Corps  
2011-2012

# I. Community

Lutheran Volunteers live in intentional community, sharing material resources, spirituality experiences, recreational time, and the joys and challenges of daily life. Community gives us the strength to work for social justice and challenges us to be open, compassionate, and willing to change. LVC expects volunteers to affirm their interdependence and responsibility to one another, to express vulnerability, nurture trust, and build authentic relationship. Community life requires effective communication, conflict resolution, self-care, and commitment.

## Enclosed Readings:

“Stages of Community-Making,” The Different Drum, M. Scott Peck  
“Transgender Equality,” by Paisley Currah and Shannon Minter

## For Reflection:

- Where is community currently occurring in your life? What specific situations point to the existence of community?
- Consider three interactions or situations in which you found support in community.
- Think of a situation in which you were angered or hurt by another person and needed to confront them. How was the situation resolved?
- What do you look to community to provide in your life?
- M. Scott Peck says, “Love is the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.” What does this definition of love have to do with living in intentional community? With working for justice? Or with living simply and sustainably?

## Additional Resources:

- Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*
- The Intentional Communities website, [www.ic.org](http://www.ic.org)
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *In the Company of Others: Making Community in the Modern World.*
- Meeker-Lowry, Susan. *Invested in the Common Good*
- Center for Conflict Resolution. *Building a United Judgment: A Handbook for Consensus Making*
- Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*
- bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions*
- Thich Nhat Hanh, “*Peace Treaty*”
- <http://www.nodumbquestions.org/>
- [http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/personalities/birnbaum\\_v\\_jennifer\\_finney\\_boylan.php](http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/personalities/birnbaum_v_jennifer_finney_boylan.php)
- Biblical References: Matthew 14: 13-21; Luke 10: 29-37; John 13: 1-20

## CHAPTER V

## Stages of Community-Making

Communities, like individuals, are unique. Still we all share the human condition. So it is that groups assembled deliberately to form themselves into community routinely go through certain stages in the process. These stages, in order, are:

Pseudocommunity  
Chaos  
Emptiness  
Community

Not every group that becomes a community follows this paradigm exactly. Communities that temporarily form in response to crisis, for instance, may skip over one or more stages for the time being. I do not insist that community development occur by formula. But in the process of community-making by design, this is the natural, usual order of things.\*

## PSEUDOCOMMUNITY

The first response of a group in seeking to form a community is most often to try to fake it. The members attempt to be an instant community by being extremely pleasant with one another and avoiding all disagreement. This attempt—this pre-

\* Others who have worked extensively with groups that have become communities have discerned that there are stages of the developmental process. Among group leaders there is even a mnemonic about such stages: "Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing." But this simple formula, while not useless, is at best incomplete.

tense of community—is what I term "pseudocommunity." It never works.

I was quite nonplussed when I first encountered pseudocommunity—particularly since it was created by experts. It occurred during a workshop in Greenwich Village, in lower Manhattan, whose members, to a person, were highly sophisticated, achievement-oriented New Yorkers. Many had undergone extensive psychoanalysis, and they were all accustomed to being "unspontaneously vulnerable." Within minutes they were sharing deep, intimate details of their lives. And during the very first break they were already hugging. Poof—instant community!

But something was missing. At first I was delighted, and I thought, Boy, this is a piece of cake. I don't have to worry about a thing. But by the middle of the day I began to grow uneasy, and it was impossible to put my finger on the problem. I didn't have the wonderful, joyful, excited feeling I had always had in community. I was, in fact, slightly bored. Yet to all intents and purposes the group seemed to be behaving just like a real community. I didn't know what to do. I didn't even know whether I ought to do anything. So I let it slide for the rest of the day.

I did not sleep well that night. Near dawn, still having no idea whether it was the right thing to do, I decided I owed it to the group to disclose my sense of unease. When we assembled the second morning I began by saying, "You're an unusually sophisticated group of people. I think that's why we seemed to become a community so quickly and easily yesterday morning. But perhaps it was too quick and too easy. I have a strange feeling that something's missing, that we're really not a community yet. Let's have a period of silence now and see how we will respond to it."

Respond the group did! Within five minutes of the end of the silence these seemingly mellow, affectionate people were almost at one another's throats. Dozens of interpersonal resentments from the previous day surfaced practically simultaneously. Fast and furiously the members began clobbering

each other with their different ideologies and theologies. It was glorious chaos! And finally we were able to begin the work of building real community, which, by the end of the workshop we succeeded in doing. But until that point of chaos the group, with all its sophistication, had succeeded only in delaying the process for a whole day.

There are two morals to this story. One is: Beware of instant community. Community-making requires time as well as effort and sacrifice. It cannot be cheaply bought. The other moral is that it is at least as easy to build community among unsophisticated people as among the sophisticated. I have never seen the community-making process work more rapidly and effectively, for instance, than among a group of civic leaders of a small Midwestern city who had almost no psychological training. The sophisticated, on the other hand, may be more adept at faking.

In pseudocommunity a group attempts to purchase community cheaply by pretense. It is not an evil, conscious pretense of deliberate black lies. Rather, it is an unconscious, gentle process whereby people who want to be loving attempt to be so by telling little white lies, by withholding some of the truth about themselves and their feelings in order to avoid conflict. But it is still a pretense. It is an inviting but illegitimate shortcut to nowhere.

The essential dynamic of pseudocommunity is conflict-avoidance. The absence of conflict in a group is not by itself diagnostic. Genuine communities may experience lovely and sometimes lengthy periods free from conflict. But that is because they have learned how to deal with conflict rather than avoid it. Pseudocommunity is conflict-avoiding; true community is conflict-resolving.

What is diagnostic of pseudocommunity is the minimization, the lack of acknowledgment, or the ignoring of individual differences. Nice people are so accustomed to being well-mannered that they are able to deploy their good manners without even thinking about what they are doing. In pseudocommunity it is as if every individual member is operating according to the

same book of etiquette. The rules of this book are: Don't do or say anything that might offend someone else; if someone does or says something that offends, annoys, or irritates you, act as if nothing has happened and pretend you are not bothered in the least; and if some form of disagreement should show signs of appearing, change the subject as quickly and smoothly as possible—rules that any good hostess knows. It is easy to see how these rules make for a smoothly functioning group. But they also crush individuality, intimacy, and honesty, and the longer it lasts the duller it gets.

The basic pretense of pseudocommunity is the denial of individual differences. The members pretend—act as if—they all have the same belief in Jesus Christ, the same understanding of the Russians, even the same life history. One of the characteristics of pseudocommunity is that people tend to speak in generalities. "Divorce is a miserable experience," they will say. Or "One has to trust one's instincts." Or "We need to accept that our parents did the best they could." Or "Once you've found God, then you don't need to be afraid anymore." Or "Jesus has saved us from our sins."

Another characteristic of pseudocommunity is that the members will let one another get away with such blanket statements. Individuals will think to themselves, I found God twenty years ago and I'm still scared, but why let the group know that? To avoid the risk of conflict they keep their feelings to themselves and even nod in agreement, as if a speaker has uttered some universal truth. Indeed, the pressure to skirt any kind of disagreement may be so great that even the very experienced communicators in the group—who know perfectly well that speaking in generalities is destructive to genuine communication—may be inhibited from challenging what they know is wrong. The effect of this inhibition is such that the proverbial observer from Mars would conclude from pseudocommunity that while human beings look very different on the outside, they are all the same on the inside. The observer might also conclude that human beings are boring.

In my experience most groups that refer to themselves as

"communities" are, in fact, pseudocommunities. Think about whether the expression of individual differences is encouraged or discouraged, for instance, in the average church congregation. Is the kind of conformism I have described in the first stage of community-making the norm or the exception in our society? Could there be many people who do not even know that there is anything beyond pseudocommunity?

Since that workshop in Greenwich Village I've found it not only easy to recognize pseudocommunity but also to nip it in the bud. Often all that is required is to challenge the platitudes or generalizations. When Mary says, "Divorce is a terrible thing," I am likely to comment: "Mary, you're making a generalization. I hope you don't mind my using you as an example for the group, but one of the things people need to learn to communicate well is how to speak personally—how to use 'I' and 'my' statements. I wonder if you couldn't rephrase your statement to 'My divorce was a terrible thing for me.'"

"All right," Mary agrees. "My divorce was a terrible thing for me."

"I'm glad you put it that way, Mary," Theresa is likely to say, "because my divorce was the best thing that ever happened to me in the last twenty years."

Once individual differences are not only allowed but encouraged to surface in some such way, the group almost immediately moves to the second stage of community development: chaos.

## CHAOS

The chaos always centers around well-intentioned but misguided attempts to heal and convert. Let me cite a prototypical example. After a period of uneasy silence a member will say, "Well, the reason I came to this workshop is that I have such-and-such a problem, and I thought I might find a solution to it here."

"I had that problem once," a second member will respond. "I did such-and-such, and it took care of the difficulty."

"Well, I tried that," the first member answers, "but it didn't solve anything."

"When I acknowledged Jesus to be my Lord and Savior," a third member announces, "it took care of that problem and every other problem I had."

"I'm sorry," says the first member, "but that Jesus Lord-and-Savior stuff just doesn't grab me. It's not where I'm at."

"No," says a fourth member. "As a matter of fact, it makes me want to puke."

"But it's *true*," proclaims a fifth member.

And so they're off.

By and large, people resist change. So the healers and converters try harder to heal or convert, until finally their victims get their backs up and start trying to heal the healers and convert the converters. It is indeed chaos.

Chaos is not just a state, it is an essential part of the process of community development. Consequently, unlike pseudocommunity, it does not simply go away as soon as the group becomes aware of it. After a period of chaos, when I remark, "We don't seem to be doing very well at community, do we?" someone will reply, "No, and it's because of this."

"No, it's because of that," someone else will say. And so they're off again.

In the stage of chaos individual differences are, unlike those in pseudocommunity, right out in the open. Only now, instead of trying to hide or ignore them, the group is attempting to obliterate them. Underlying the attempts to heal and convert is not so much the motive of love as the motive to make everyone *normal*—and the motive to win, as the members fight over whose norm might prevail.

The desire to convert, however, does not necessarily center around issues of theology. The stage of chaos in the group of civic leaders I previously mentioned revolved around the different plans of the members to benefit their city. One felt her plan to house the homeless was the way. Another saw the

labor-management relations board as the most critical focus. Another believed the program to curb child abuse was more essential. So these well-motivated men and women clobbered each other over the head with their own pet projects; each wanted his or her particular project to win or prevail, and each attempted to convert the others to his or her way.

The stage of chaos is a time of fighting and struggle. But that is not its essence. Frequently, fully developed communities will be required to fight and struggle. Only they have learned to do so effectively. The struggle during chaos is chaotic. It is not merely noisy, it is uncreative, unconstructive. The disagreement that arises from time to time in a genuine community is loving and respectful and usually remarkably quiet—even peaceful—as the members work hard to listen to each other. Still, upon occasion in a fully mature community the discussion might become heated. Yet even then it is vivacious, and one has a feeling of excitement over the consensus that will be hammered out. Not so in chaos. If anything, chaos, like pseudocommunity, is boring, as the members continually swat at each other to little or no effect. It has no grace or rhythm. Indeed, the predominant feeling an observer is likely to have in response to a group in the chaotic stage of development is despair. The struggle is going nowhere, accomplishing nothing. It is no fun.

Since chaos is unpleasant, it is common for the members of a group in this stage to attack not only each other but also their leader. "We wouldn't be squabbling like this if we had effective leadership," they will say. "We deserve more direction than you've been giving us, Scotty." In some sense they are quite correct; their chaos is a natural response to a relative lack of direction. The chaos could easily be circumvented by an authoritarian leader—a dictator—who assigned them specific tasks and goals. The only problem is that a group led by a dictator is not, and never can be, a community. Community and totalitarianism are incompatible.

In response to this perceived vacuum of leadership during the chaotic stage of community development, it is common for

one or more members of the group to attempt to replace the designated leader. He or she (usually it is a he) will say, "Look, this is getting us nowhere. Why don't we go around the circle counterclockwise and each person say something about himself or herself?" Or "Why don't we break into small groups of six or eight, and then we can get somewhere?" Or "Why don't we form a subcommittee to develop a definition of community? Then we will know where we're going."

The problem of the emergence of such "secondary leaders" is not their emergence but their proposed solutions. What they are proposing, one way or another, is virtually always an "escape into organization." It is true that organizing is a solution to chaos. Indeed, that is the primary reason for organization: to minimize chaos. The trouble is, however, that organization and community are also incompatible. Committees and chairpeople do not a community make. I am not implying that it is impossible for a business, church, or some other organization to have a degree of community within itself. I am not an anarchist. But an organization is able to nurture a measure of community within itself only to the extent that it is willing to risk or tolerate a certain lack of structure. As long as the goal is community-building, organization as an attempted solution to chaos is an unworkable solution.

The duration of the chaotic stage of community development varies, depending on the nature of the leader and the nature of the group. Some groups will leave it behind almost as soon as I point the way out. Even though chaos is unpleasant, other groups will resist its proper resolution for a number of painful hours. Back in the sensitivity-group days there were a number of groups that languished in unproductive chaos for their entire existence.

The proper resolution of chaos is not easy. Because it is both unproductive and unpleasant, it may seem that the group has *degenerated* from pseudocommunity into chaos. But chaos is not necessarily the worst place for a group to be. Several years ago I had the opportunity to consult briefly with a large church that was in chaos. A few years before, the congregation had

chosen a dynamic new minister to lead it. His style of leadership turned out to be even more assertive than they had bargained for. By the time I visited, over a third of the congregation had been deeply alienated by this style, but the majority was delighted with it. The disagreement was quite vocal, and the membership was in real pain over the schism. Yet in their outspokenness, their open suffering, and their commitment to hang in there as they struggled with each other I sensed a great deal of vitality. I was hardly able to suggest any immediate solution. But I was at least able to offer some consolation by telling them that I sensed more vitality in their congregation than most church bodies. "Your chaos," I explained to them, "is preferable to pseudocommunity. You are not a healthy community, but you are able to confront the issues openly. Fighting is far better than pretending you are not divided. It's painful, but it's a beginning. You are aware that you need to move beyond your warring factions, and that's infinitely more hopeful than if you felt you didn't need to move at all."

### EMPTINESS

"There are only two ways out of chaos," I will explain to a group after it has spent a sufficient period of time squabbling and getting nowhere. "One is into organization—but organization is never community. The only other way is into and through emptiness."

More often than not the group will simply ignore me and go on squabbling. Then after another while I will say, "I suggested to you that the only way from chaos to community is into and through emptiness. But apparently you were not terribly interested in my suggestion." More squabbling, but finally a member will ask with a note of annoyance, "Well, what is this emptiness stuff anyway?"

It is no accident that groups are not generally eager to pick up on my suggestion of emptiness. The fact that "emptiness"

is a mystical sort of word and concept is not the deterrent. People are smart, and often in the dimmer recesses of their consciousness they know more than they want to know. As soon as I mention "emptiness," they have a presentiment of what is to come. And they are in no hurry to accept it.

Emptiness is the hard part. It is also the most crucial stage of community development. It is the bridge between chaos and community.

When the members of a group finally ask me to explain what I mean by emptiness, I tell them simply that they need to empty themselves of barriers to communication. And I am able to use their behavior during chaos to point out to them specific things—feelings, assumptions, ideas, and motives—that have so filled their minds as to make them impervious as billiard balls. The process of emptying themselves of these barriers is the key to the transition from "rugged" to "soft" individualism. The most common (and interrelated) barriers to communication that people need to empty themselves of before they can enter genuine community are:

*Expectations and Preconceptions.* Community-building is an adventure, a going into the unknown. People are routinely terrified of the emptiness of the unknown. Consequently they fill their minds with generally false expectations of what the experience will be like. In fact, we humans seldom go into any situation without preconceptions. We then try to make the experience conform to our expectations. Occasionally this is useful behavior, but usually (and always in regard to community-building) it is destructive. Until such time as we can empty ourselves of expectations and stop trying to fit others and our relationships with them into a preconceived mold we cannot really listen, hear, or experience. "Life is what happens when you've planned something else," someone once wisely put it. But despite this wisdom, we still do not go easily into new situations with an open (and empty) mind.

*Prejudices.* Prejudice, which is probably more often uncon-



scious than conscious, comes in two forms. One is the judgments we make about people without any experience of them whatsoever, as when you or I might say to ourselves on meeting a stranger, "He's effeminate. I bet he's a real creep." Or "My God, she looks like she's ninety—probably senile." Even more common are the judgments we make about people on the basis of very brief, limited experience. Not a workshop goes by when I don't quickly conclude that some member is a real "nerd," only to discover later that that person has enormous gifts. One reason to distrust instant community is that community-building requires time—the time to have sufficient experience to become conscious of our prejudices and then to empty ourselves of them.

*Ideology, Theology, and Solutions.* Obviously we cannot move very far toward community with our fellow human beings when we are thinking and feeling. She clearly has no appreciation of Christian doctrine; she has a long way to go before she will be saved like me. Or else, Well, it's clear he's a Republican businessman hawk. I hope there'll be someone here worth relating to. It is not only such ideological and theological rigidities that we need to discard, it is any idea that assumes the status of "the one and only right way." So it was that the group of Midwestern civic leaders I mentioned had to empty themselves of their pet plans, which each thought was the solution for their city.

In speaking of this emptying process, however, I do not mean to imply we should utterly forsake our sometimes hard-won sentiments and understandings. A community-building workshop in Virginia several years ago offered an example of the distinction between emptying and obliteration. The group was the most dedicated band of converters I have ever encountered. Everyone wanted to talk about God; everyone had a different idea of God; and everyone was certain she or he knew exactly who God was. It didn't take us long to get into chaos of magnificent proportions. But thirty-six hours later, after the group had made its miraculous transition from chaos

to community, I told them, "It's fascinating. Today you are still talking just as much about God as you were yesterday. In that respect you haven't changed. What has happened, however, is the way in which you talk. Yesterday each of you was talking as if you had God in your back pocket. Today you are all talking about God with humility and a sense of humor."

*The Need to Heal, Convert, Fix, or Solve.* During the stage of chaos, when the members of a group attempt to heal or convert each other, they believe they are being loving. And they are truly surprised by the chaos that results. After all, isn't it the loving thing to do to relieve your neighbor of her suffering or help him to see the light? Actually, however, almost all these attempts to convert and heal are not only naïve and ineffective but quite self-centered and self-serving. It hurts me when my friend is in pain. If I can do something to get rid of this pain I will feel better. My most basic motive when I strive to heal is to feel good myself. But there are several problems here. One is that my cure is usually not my friend's. Indeed, offering someone my cure usually only makes that person feel worse. So it was that all the advice that Job's friends gave him in his time of affliction served only to make him more miserable. The fact of the matter is that often the most loving thing we can do when a friend is in pain is to *share* that pain—to be there even when we have nothing to offer except our presence and even when being there is painful to ourselves.

The same is true with the attempt to convert. If your theology or ideology is different from mine, it calls mine into question. It is uncomfortable for me to be uncertain of my own understanding in such basic matters. On the other hand, if I could convert you to my way of thinking, it would not only relieve my discomfort, it would be further proof of the rectitude of my beliefs and cast me in the role of savior to boot. How much easier and nicer that would be than extending myself to understand you as you are.

As they enter the stage of emptiness the members of a group come to realize—sometimes suddenly, sometimes gradually—



that their desire to heal, convert, or otherwise "solve" their interpersonal differences is a self-centered desire for comfort through the obliteration of these differences. And then it begins to dawn on them that there may be an opposite way: the appreciation and celebration of interpersonal differences. No group ever got the message more quickly than those unsophisticated Midwestern civic leaders. Because we had little time to work together, I was blunt with them. "I told you at the beginning," I reminded them, "that our purpose in being together is to form ourselves into a community, and not to solve the problems of your city. Yet here you are in short order not talking about yourselves but about your proposed solutions. They all sound to me like very fine ideas, but the fact is that you are cllobbering each other over the head with them. Now, if you want, you can keep on doing that for the next twenty-four hours, but I honestly don't think it's going to get you or the city any further than when you walked in here this morning. And it certainly isn't going to get you to community. If you want to get to community, on the other hand, you're going to have to empty yourselves of your fine proposals and your need to see them triumph. And maybe, just maybe, if you become a true community, you will be able to work together in such a way that it will help your city. I don't know. But let's take an extra-long break—forty minutes—and let's see if during that time each of you can possibly empty yourself of your solutions sufficiently for us at least to get to know each other as different human beings."

We became a community within the hour.

*The Need to Control.* This barrier to community is my own prime bugaboo. As the designated leader of a workshop I am supposed to see to it that the group does not get out of control—that it comes to no harm. Furthermore, even though I have told the group that each member is no more and no less responsible than any other member for the success of the group, I don't really feel that way in my heart. If the workshop fails, I feel, I'm the one who is going to look bad. Consequently

I am constantly tempted to *do* things—manipulations or maneuvers—that will ensure the desired outcome. But the desired outcome—community—cannot be achieved by an authoritarian leader who calls the shots. It must be a creation of the group as a whole. Paradoxically, then, to be an effective leader I must spend most of the time sitting back, *doing nothing*, waiting, letting it happen. As a basically overcontrolling person I don't do that very easily.

The need for control—to ensure the desired outcome—is at least partially rooted in the fear of failure. For me to empty myself of my overcontrolling tendencies I must continually empty myself of this fear. I must be willing to fail. Indeed, a significant number of workshops have succeeded in becoming communities only after I have said to myself, "Well, it looks as if this one is going to fail, and I'm helpless to do anything about it." I am not sure such timing is accidental.

The learning that occurs in community-building is frequently extended to day-to-day living. My experience in emptying myself of my need to control has begun to improve some of my everyday relationships, including my relationship to life itself. Others have joined me, through community, in learning an increased capacity for surrender and how to appreciate the truth that often "Life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived."

I have hardly exhausted the list of things that individuals may need to give up in order to form themselves into a community. I routinely ask the members of a group to reflect in silence, during a break period or overnight, on what they as individuals most need to empty themselves of in their own unique lives. When they return, their reports are as varied as the topography of our globe: "I need to give up my need for my parents' approval," "my need to be liked," "my resentment of my son," "my preoccupation with money," "my anger at God," "my dislike of homosexuals," "my concern about neatness," and so on, and so on. Such giving up is a sacrificial process. Consequently the stage of emptiness in community development is a time of sacrifice. And sacrifice hurts. "Do I

have to give up everything?" a group member once wailed during this stage.

"No," I replied, "just everything that stands in your way."

Such sacrifice hurts because it is a kind of death, the kind of death that is necessary for rebirth. But even when we realize this intellectually, such dying is still a fearsome adventure into the unknown. And many group members during the stage of emptiness often seem almost paralyzed between fear and hope, because they will incorrectly think and feel about emptiness not in terms of rebirth but in terms of "nothingness" or annihilation.

The terror that may be involved was never more dramatically illustrated than in Martin's "rebirth." Martin was a slightly hard and depressed-appearing sixty-year-old man whose "workaholic" had made him extremely successful, even famous. During the stage of emptiness in a workshop he and his wife attended, and when the group was still attempting to deal with emptiness on the level of an intellectual concept, Martin suddenly began to tremble and shake. For a brief moment I thought he might be having a seizure. But then, almost as if he were in a trance, he began to moan, "I'm scared. I don't know what's happening to me. All this talk about emptiness. I don't know what it means. I feel I'm going to die. I'm terrified."

Several of us gathered around Martin, holding him for comfort, still uncertain whether he was in a physical or emotional crisis.

"It feels like dying," Martin continued to moan. "Emptiness. I don't know what emptiness is. All my life I've done things. You mean I don't have to do anything? I'm scared."

Martin's wife took his hand. "No, you don't have to do anything, Martin," she said.

"But I've always done things," Martin continued. "I don't know what it's like not to do anything. Emptiness. Is that what emptiness is? Giving up doing things? Could I really not do anything?"

"It's all right to do nothing, Martin," his wife responded.

Martin stopped shaking. We held him for about five min-

utes. Then he let us know that his fear of emptiness, his terror of dying, had subsided. And within an hour his face began to radiate a soft serenity. He knew that he had been broken and had survived. He also knew that through his brokenness he had somehow helped the whole group toward community.

Because the stage of emptiness can be so painful, there are two questions I am routinely asked with agony. One is, "Isn't there any way into community except through emptiness?" My answer is "No." The other question is, "Isn't there any way into community except through the sharing of brokenness?" Again my answer is "No."

As a group moves into emptiness, a few of its members begin to share their own brokenness—their defeats, failures, doubts, fears, inadequacies, and sins. They begin to stop acting as if they "had it all together" as they reflect on those things they need to empty themselves of. But the other members generally do not listen to them very attentively. Either they revert to attempts to heal or convert the broken members or else they ignore them by quickly changing the topic. Consequently those who have made themselves vulnerable tend to retreat quickly into their shells. It is not easy to confess your weakness when others are apt to try immediately to change you or else behave as if you haven't said anything worth listening to.

Sometimes the group by itself will soon come to recognize that it is blocking expressions of pain and suffering—that in order to truly listen they have to *truly* empty themselves, even of their distaste for "bad news." If they don't, it becomes necessary for me to point out to its members that they are discouraging the sharing of brokenness. Some groups will then immediately correct their callousness. But other groups toward the end of the stage of emptiness will wage their final last-ditch struggle against community. Typically, there will be a spokesman who will say, "Look, I have my own burdens at home. There's no need to pay good money and spend a whole weekend just to take on more burdens. I'm all for this community business, but I don't see why we have to focus so much

on negative things all the time. Why can't we talk about the good things, the things we have in common, our successes instead of our failures? I'd like this to be a joyful experience. What's the point of community if it can't be joyful?"

Basically this final resistance is an attempt to flee back into pseudocommunity. But here the issue at stake is no longer over whether individual differences will be denied. The group has moved too far for that. Instead the struggle is over wholeness. It is over whether the group will choose to embrace not only the light of life but also life's darkness. True community is joyful, but it is also realistic. Sorrow and joy must be seen in their proper proportions.

I have spoken of the stage of emptiness largely as if it were something that occurs solely within the minds and souls of the individuals who compose a group. But community is always something more than the sum total of the individuals present. Pseudocommunity, chaos, and emptiness are not so much individual stages as group stages. The transformation of a group from a collection of individuals into genuine community requires little deaths in many of those individuals. But it is also a process of group death, group dying. During the stage of emptiness my own gut feeling is often not so much the pain of watching individuals here and there undergoing little deaths and rebirths as it is the pain of witnessing a group in its death throes. The whole group seems to writhe and moan in its travail. Individuals will sometimes speak for the group. "It's like we're dying. The group is in agony. Can't you help us? I didn't know we'd have to die to become a community."

Just as the physical death of some individuals is rapid and gentle while for others agonizing and protracted, so it is for the emotional surrender of groups. Whether sudden or gradual, however, all the groups in my experience have eventually succeeded in completing, accomplishing, this death. They have all made it through emptiness, through the time of sacrifice, into community. This is an extraordinary testament to the human spirit. What it means is that given the right circum-

stances and knowledge of the rules, on a certain but very real level we human beings are able to die for each other.

## COMMUNITY

When its death has been completed, open and empty, the group enters community. In this final stage a soft quietness descends. It is a kind of peace. The room is bathed in peace. Then, quietly, a member begins to talk about herself. She is being very vulnerable. She is speaking of the deepest part of herself. The group hangs on each word. No one realized she was capable of such eloquence.

When she is finished there is a hush. It goes on a long time. But it does not seem long. There is no uneasiness in this silence. Slowly, out of the silence, another member begins to talk. He too is speaking very deeply, very personally, about himself. He is not trying to heal or convert the first person. He's not even trying to respond to her. It's not she but he who is the subject. Yet the other members of the group do not sense he has ignored her. What they feel is that it is as if he is laying himself down next to her on an altar.

The silence returns.

A third member speaks. Perhaps it will be to respond to the previous speaker, but there will be in this response no attempt to heal or convert. It may be a joke, but it will not be at anyone's expense. It may be a short poem that is almost magically appropriate. It could be anything soft and gentle, but again it will be a gift.

Then the next member speaks. And as it goes on, there will be a great deal of sadness and grief expressed; but there will also be much laughter and joy. There will be tears in abundance. Sometimes they will be tears of sadness, sometimes of joy. Sometimes, simultaneously, they will be tears of both. And then something almost more singular happens. An extraordinary amount of healing and converting begins to occur—now

that no one is trying to convert or heal. And community has been born.

What happens next? The group has become a community. Where does it go from here? What, then, is its task?

There is no one answer to those questions. For the groups that have assembled specifically for a short-term experience of community, its primary task may be no more than simply to enjoy that experience—and benefit from the healing that accompanies it. It will have the additional task, however, of ending itself. Somehow there must be closure. Women and men who have come to care for each other deeply need time to say goodbyes. The pains of returning to an everyday world without community need expression. It is important for short-term communities to give themselves the time for ending. This is often done best when the community is able to develop for itself a joyous sort of funeral, with some kind of liturgy or ritual for conclusion.

If the group has assembled with the ultimate goal of solving a problem—planning a campaign, healing a division within a congregation, engineering a merger, for example—then it should get on with that task. But only after it has had the time to enjoy the experience of community for itself sufficiently to cement the experience. Such groups should always bear in mind the rule: “Community-building first, problem-solving second.”

Or the task of the community may be the difficult one of deciding whether it will or will not maintain itself. This decision usually should not be made quickly. In the joy of the moment members may make commitments that they shortly discover they are unable to fulfill. The consequences of long-term commitment are major and should not be taken lightly.

If a community—or part of it—does decide to maintain itself, it will have many new tasks. Community maintenance requires that multiple major decisions be made or remade over extensive periods of time. The community will frequently fall back into chaos or even pseudocommunity in the process. Over and over again it will need to do the agonizing work of

reemptying itself. Many groups fail here. Many convents and monasteries, for instance, while referring to themselves as “communities,” long ago allowed themselves to become rigid authoritarian organizations. As such they may continue to fill useful roles in society, but they do so without joy and fail to be a “safe place” for their membership. They have forgotten that maintaining themselves as a true community should take priority over all the other tasks of their community.

Because I have spoken so glowingly of its virtues, it worries me that some might conclude that life in community is easier or more comfortable than ordinary existence. It is not. But it is certainly more *lively*, more intense. The agony is actually greater, but so is the joy. The experience of joy in community, however, is hardly automatic. During times of struggle the majority of the members of a true community will not experience joy. Instead, the prevailing mood may be one of anxiety, frustration, or fatigue. Even when the dominant mood is one of joy, a few members, because of individual worries or conflicts, may still be unable to feel a part of the community spirit. Yet the most common emotional response to the spirit of community is the feeling of joy.

It is like falling in love. When they enter community, people in a very real sense do fall in love with one another en masse. They not only feel like touching and hugging each other, they feel like hugging everyone all at once. During the highest moments the energy level is supernatural. It is ecstatic. Lily provided one community myth during a workshop in a Knoxville hotel when she pointed to an electrical outlet in the center of the floor and commented: “It’s as if we’re connected to the entire electrical energy output of the TVA.”

Great power, however, can sometimes hold potential danger. The danger of the power of true community is never the creation of mob psychology but of group sexuality. It is only natural when a group of people fall in love with one another that enormous sexual energy should be released. Usually this is not harmful, but it is wise for communities to be aware of their great potential sexuality in order that it does not get out

of hand. It may need to be suppressed. It should not, however, be repressed. And it is wise to remember that the experience of the other forms of love, "phila" and "agape" (brother or sister love, and divine love) can be even deeper and more rewarding than simple erotic or romantic bonding. The sexuality of community is an expression of its joy, and its energy can be channeled to useful and creative purpose.

If it is so channeled, life in community may touch upon something perhaps even deeper than joy. There are a few who repeatedly seek out brief experiences of community as if such episodes were some sort of "fix." This is not to be decried. We all need "fixes" of joy in our lives. But what repeatedly draws me into community is something more. When I am with a group of human beings committed to hanging in there through both the agony and the joy of community, I have a dim sense that I am participating in a phenomenon for which there is only one word. I almost hesitate to use it. The word is "glory."



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*The names of individuals described herein have been changed,  
wherever appropriate, to preserve confidentiality.*

# Transgender Equality

## A HANDBOOK FOR ACTIVISTS AND POLICYMAKERS

by Paisley Currah  
and Shannon Minter

### Introduction by Jamison Green

**Transgendered people are individuals of any age or sex whose appearance, personal characteristics, or behaviors differ from stereotypes about how men and women are “supposed” to be.** Transgendered people have existed in every culture, race, and class since the story of human life has been recorded. Only the term “transgender” and the medical technology available to transsexual people are new.

Over the past few years, many gay, lesbian and bisexual organizations have broadened the scope of their work to include the issues and concerns of transgendered people (hence the acronym GLBT for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people).<sup>1</sup> This change reflects an acknowledgment that sexism and gender stereotyping have a powerful effect on the social and legal treatment of gay as well as transgendered people. It also reflects the growing strength and maturity of the GLBT civil rights movement, which has expanded its self-understanding to include heterosexual family members and friends, allies who have endured similar oppressions, and others who share a broader vision of human rights and social justice than a narrowly defined “gay identity politics” could hope to achieve.

In addition to providing up-to-date information on the current status of efforts to achieve basic legislative protections for transgendered people, the purpose of this publication is to promote greater understanding of transgender issues. To build an effective political movement and to win civil rights legislation with the broadest possible effect, we must all learn to be advocates for our entire community, including educating ourselves and being prepared to talk about experiences and issues that are not always our own. With that goal in mind, the following discussion is designed to provide a basic overview of transgender issues and of how they are connected to those of gay, lesbian and bisexual people.



## **DEFINING SOME COMMON TERMS: “GENDER,” “GENDER IDENTITY” AND “GENDER EXPRESSION”**

### **Gender v. Sex**

In everyday language as well as in the law, the terms “gender” and “sex” are used interchangeably. However, it is often important to distinguish the two terms. Social scientists, for example, use the term “sex” to refer to a person’s biological or anatomical identity as male or female, while reserving the term “gender” for the collection of characteristics that are culturally associated with maleness or femaleness.

**The specific characteristics that are socially defined as “masculine” or “feminine” vary across cultures and over time within any given culture.** For example, for centuries, standard Greek military attire was a type of skirt. As another example, in many American cities, just a few decades ago, women were forbidden (often by statutory law) to wear trousers or pants. Often women who violated this gender norm were perceived as men, or were assumed to have a desire to be men, whereas those assumptions are seen as outdated now. Even today, social norms about gender vary significantly within different geographic regions, classes, and ethnic or racial groups. For example, social expectations concerning what counts as “appropriately” masculine or feminine attire in a small farming community in the Midwest may differ considerably from those in Los Angeles, New York City or other large cities.

While these differences may sometimes simply reflect different cultural norms, they are also frequently used to perpetuate invidious racist stereotypes and practices. For example, the racist stereotype that black men are “hypermasculine” and therefore supposedly prone to violent and criminal behavior has contributed to pervasive discrimination against black men in the criminal justice system, from the use of “racial profiling” by law enforcement personnel to the disproportionate targeting of black men in prosecution and sentencing. In practice, stereotypes about gender are rarely independent of stereotypical assumptions about race and class.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, it is much more common than one might think for people to have gender characteristics that are stereotypically ascribed to the opposite sex. If one looks closely at a wide variety of people, it is easy to see varying degrees of “transgender” characteristics displayed by a large percentage of any given population. In fact, even if one looks closely at any given individual, it is always possible to find traits that might be characterized as “gender atypical.” What singles out many transgendered people is simply a preponderance of these characteristics, causing observers to doubt their perception of an individual’s gender or sex, which often leads them to question the person’s sexual orientation as well.

In short, both the variable definitions of “masculinity” and “femininity” within different cultures and the fact that all people have a mix of gendered traits indicate that the qualities we define as “masculine” or “feminine” are ultimately simply human. From this perspective, naming “transgender” people as a discrete group may be arbitrary and even misleading, insofar as it reinforces the mistaken view that transgender individuals are somehow fundamentally different than other people. From a political perspective, however, it has been necessary to embrace the label “transgender” to foster a sense of solidarity among those who bear the brunt of discrimination against gender atypical people. Only by naming that discrimination can we hope to end it, and only by building a movement for transgender civil rights can we create a world in which the label “transgender” will no longer be needed.

### **Gender Identity and Gender Expression**

“Gender identity” refers to a person’s internal, deeply felt sense of being either male or female, or something other or in between. Because gender identity is internal and personally defined, it is not visible to others. In contrast, a person’s “gender expression” is external and socially perceived. Gender expression refers to all of the external characteristics and behaviors that are socially defined as either masculine or feminine, such as dress, mannerisms, speech patterns and social interactions.

### **Transsexual People**

Most people experience their gender identity as correlating to, or in line with, their physical sex. That is, most people who are born with female bodies also have a female gender identity (i.e., an internal sense that “I am a woman”), and most people who are born with male bodies have a male gender identity (i.e., an internal sense that “I

am a man.”). For a transsexual person, however, there is a conflict between one’s physical sex and one’s gender identity as a man or a woman. Female-to-male transsexual (FTM) people are born with female bodies, but have a predominantly male gender identity. Male-to-female transsexual (MTF) people are born with male bodies, but have a female gender identity. Many, but not all, transsexual people undergo medical treatment to change their physical sex through hormone therapy and sex reassignment surgeries.

Female-to-male transsexual people are rarely mentioned in contemporary discussions of transsexual lives, with the recent exception of Brandon Teena, whose brutal murder in Nebraska in 1993 garnered widespread media attention and was depicted in the 1999 movie *Boys Don’t Cry*. The contemporary culture is more familiar with male-to-female narratives like those of Jan Morris or Renee Richards, or with challenges to gender norms represented most publicly by author/performance artist Kate Bornstein. Despite the relative invisibility of FTMs, there are equal numbers of FTM and MTF transsexual people throughout the world.<sup>3</sup>

## WHAT DOES TRANSGENDER MEAN?

The contemporary term “transgender” arose in the mid-1990s from the grassroots community of gender-different people. Unlike the term “transsexual,” it is not a medical or psychiatric diagnosis. In contemporary usage, transgender has become an “umbrella” term that is used to describe a wide range of identities and experiences, including but not limited to: pre-operative, post-operative, and non-operative transsexual people; male and female cross-dressers (sometimes referred to as “transvestites,” “drag queens” or “drag kings”); intersexed individuals; and men and women, regardless of sexual orientation, whose appearance or characteristics are perceived to be gender atypical.

**In its broadest sense, transgender encompasses anyone whose identity or behavior falls outside of stereotypical gender norms.** That includes people who do not self-identify as transgender, but who are perceived as such by others and thus are subject to the same social oppressions and physical violence as those who actually identify with any of these categories. Other current synonyms for transgender include “gender variant,” “gender different,” and “gender non-conforming.”<sup>4</sup>

Before the mid-1990s, the term “transgender” had a narrower and more specific meaning. As coined several decades ago by Dr. Virginia Prince, who has published numerous books and articles on the subject,<sup>5</sup> the term originally referred to biological men who are satisfied with their male genitalia, but who wish to be seen and to live in the world as women. In contrast to transsexual people, “transgender” persons (in the older, more narrow sense of the term) have come to terms with the contradiction between their bodies and their gender identities and are not troubled by that contradiction, so they have not shown up in doctors’ offices to be diagnosed and documented. Instead, they are more likely to show up in sociological or anthropological studies, or to be writing their own stories in the form of autobiographies, essays or books. As a group, their sexual orientation is predominantly heterosexual (based on genitalia), but there are also bisexual, asexual, and homosexual individuals. Sexual orientation or behavior is not the primary issue or primary motivation for transgendered people; rather, the issue is wishing to live and to be perceived as a gender that is different than one’s biological sex. This is, of course, an oversimplification because the relationship between gender identity and sexual desire is highly complex and individual.

Historically, people who have female bodies but who live their lives as men have received less attention than their male-bodied counterparts. The world is much more familiar with stories of male-to-female gender crossing. Nonetheless, there are many women throughout history who have conformed to this definition of transgender, as well as many who do so today. These individuals are often referred to as “passing women,” of whom there are numerous historical examples such as Catalina de Erauso, a soldier in the Spanish army stationed in Chile and Peru in the early 1600s, and Dr. James Barry, a surgeon in the British army in the early 1800s.<sup>6</sup> In the US, the bestknown contemporary example is Billy Tipton, the jazz musician who, to the surprise of his adopted children (then adults) and his ex-wife, was discovered on his death in 1989 to have a female body.<sup>7</sup> As in the case of male-bodied transgender persons, female-bodied transgender persons may be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual or asexual. Sometimes, as in Tipton’s case, those who have female partners or wives consider themselves to be heterosexual, based on their gender identification rather than their female genitalia. In other cases, such as that of contemporary trans activist and author Leslie Feinberg, some who have female partners may identify as lesbian. And then there are those like Jack Bee Garland, who died in 1936, who preferred to live as a man in the company of men.<sup>8</sup> His biographer theorized that Garland was a gay-identified FTM (female-to-male) transsexual who would have availed himself of medical treatment had it been available.

Today, as the 21st century begins to unfold, the term “transgender” encompasses a much broader spectrum of experience. Many transsexual people have been willing to take on the label of transgender because it describes their experience before their change of sex, or in some way helps to describe their ongoing consciousness once they have changed their sex, implying the broader social awareness they may have as a result of experiencing life from within two kinds of (perceived) bodies, though their gender identity may always have remained the same. Many gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) people are taking on the transgender label because their gender presentation crosses arbitrary boundaries that they want to render less constraining, or because they recognize that loving a person of the same sex is in itself a challenge to dominant gender norms.

The expansiveness of the contemporary transgender movement is evident in other ways as well. There is a growing awareness of the ubiquity and diversity of transgender identities across the globe and within different communities in the US. As a wealth of historical research has shown, transgendered people have long been a part of many nonwestern cultures, from the Hijra of India to the “two spirited” peoples who, to varying degrees, were accepted within many Native American cultures prior to their contact with European colonists.<sup>9</sup> Within the US, GLBT scholars and activists have documented the experiences and contributions of transgendered people within African-American, Asian-American, Latino/a, Native American and other communities, both historically and in the present.<sup>10</sup>

Variety and diversity are the hallmarks of the contemporary transgender movement. There is no one way to be, and there is room for everyone to be who they are.

## **WHAT ABOUT INTERSEXED PEOPLE?<sup>11</sup>**

**Though many people believe that all infants are born clearly male or female, in fact Mother Nature is not so binary-minded.** At least one in every 2,000 children is born with a sexual anatomy that mixes male and female characteristics in ways that make it difficult, even for an expert, to label them male or female. Although no one is ever born with two full sets of genitals, male and female, some intersexed infants may have ambiguous genitalia, such as a penis that is judged “too small” or a clitoris that is judged “too large.”

Parents concerned about their infant’s health and well-being are often frightened by this variation. Although genital ambiguity does not in itself represent a health problem, parents often fear that their children will be adversely affected by being different, or that somehow the child will grow up to be lesbian or gay.

Some intersexed people are born with genitals that look like most girls’ or boys’ genitals, but may have internal reproductive organs usually associated with the other sex.. Others have bodies that do not spontaneously go through puberty, or that exhibit pubertal changes many years ahead of the usual schedule, or go through pubertal changes usually associated with the opposite sex, or experience some of the pubertal changes of both sexes. Conditions such as congenital absence of the vagina (1 in every 5000 female births) and hypospadias, in which the urethral opening does not occur at the tip of the penis (1 in every 200 male births) are also considered by many physicians to be intersexed conditions.<sup>12</sup>

Around the late 1950s, it became widespread practice to subject intersexed children to surgeries and hormone treatments intended to ensure that the child is viewed as clearly female or clearly male. These procedures are not medically necessary; instead, they are designed to make the child’s genitals look more “normal.”<sup>13</sup> In recent years a growing number of people who were subjected to genital surgeries as infants and children have spoken out against these medical interventions as harmful, unethical, and based upon nothing more than social prejudice. Their voices have now begun to create dissent among the doctors who recommend and perform these surgical interventions.<sup>14</sup>

Medical practice has been based upon the idea that sexual ambiguity is shameful and must be surgically “disappeared.” For that reason, doctors have been taught that they must not give intersexed children or adults accurate information about procedures, or about their medical history. Often intersexed people are able to adapt somewhat to their assigned gender, but sometimes this does not work out the way the doctors believe it will. Sometimes the person’s gender turns out to be the opposite of their surgically assigned sex; in other cases, the person always feels “in between.” Some intersexed people have a problematic relationship with their own genitalia, and struggle with doubts about their ability to relate intimately with other people because of surgically created sexual dysfunction. A sense of inadequacy created by years of disapproving medical attention to their bodies, <sup>15</sup> and a medical posture that sexual ambiguity is shameful and freakish can create severe problems with self-esteem.

In some cases, intersexed people must undergo the same medical treatments as transsexual people and face the same social obstacles and prejudices.

The view that there is a continuum of sexual development along which all individuals fall is parallel to the contemporary understanding that gender identity and sexual orientation also reside on a continuum. Contemporary theorists hold that every point on this continuum is a manifestation of human diversity—not a matter of “correct or incorrect” or “right or wrong,” but just what happens in life. These views have been quickly gaining favor in the medical/psychological profession since the advent of an organized self-advocacy movement by intersexed people, led by the Intersex Society of North America.

Most intersexed conditions are not visible in the course of ordinary social interactions. Nonetheless, in addition to being stigmatized and in some cases physically damaged by inappropriate medical treatments, intersexed people are often discriminated against in employment and other areas if their intersexed identity becomes known. Like other transgendered people, intersexed people have mostly been excluded from any legal protection under existing anti-discrimination laws.

## **WHAT'S THE GLBT CONNECTION?**

The struggle to establish civil rights protections for transgendered people cannot be separated from the struggle to win freedom and equality for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people.

- Many transgendered people are gay, lesbian, or bisexual.
- Many gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are also transgender.
- Trans people have always been present in the GLB community. Drag and butch/femme culture, as well as androgyny and gender-bending are hallmarks of transgender influence.
- Lesbian, gay and bisexual people frequently challenge gender boundaries in their social (in addition to sexual) behavior, and are often victims of hate crimes because of their gender presentation.

Despite these strong connections, there are also historically based reasons for misunderstanding and mistrust between gay and transgendered people. When homosexuality was first being defined and studied by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Magnus Hirschfeld, and Havelock Ellis in the late 19th and early 20th century, many of the first identified homosexual people (then called “inverts”) were what we would now term transgendered individuals. These were visibly gender-variant people, many of whom expressed a strong identification with the “opposite sex” to the point of wishing (in some cases) that they could change their bodies to become members of the opposite sex. This led some physicians and researchers to believe that transgendered (and particularly transsexual) people were simply homophobic homosexuals. It also led some people to believe that doctors invented transsexualism as a cure for homosexuality.

It is important for GLBT activists to understand that a hundred years ago the only people labeled as homosexual or lesbian were those who exhibited transgender characteristics. There was no label for masculine men who had sex with other men or for feminine women who had sex with other women. The effort to move away from the term “invert” and to define homosexuality as same-sex love or sexual behavior, and the drive to accept gay and lesbian people as “normal,” contributed to the marginalization of trans people.

Beginning in the 1950s, the availability of hormone therapy and sex reassignment surgeries for transsexual people drove another wedge between gay and trans people. The doctors and other medical professionals who controlled access to treatment were deeply homophobic and often projected their homophobia onto their patients. To gain access to medical treatment, transsexual people had to censor their own experiences and beliefs and, in particular, had to renounce any similarity to or affiliation with lesbians and gay men. This coercive dynamic perpetuated many inaccurate stereotypes about trans people, including the widespread misconception (which is unfortunately shared by many GLB people) that transsexual people are homophobic and reactionary and have no political goals other than being accepted as “normal” heterosexuals. It has also perpetuated confusion about the relationship between sex, gender and sexual orientation.

In reality, whether a person is transsexual has no direct or predictable connection to his or her sexual orientation, as evidenced by the fact that transsexual people have the same diverse range of erotic experiences, desires and identifications as non-transsexual people. Although erotic desire and self-image are components of every person's

psyche and certainly constitute powerful drives motivating our behavior, there is no evidence that sexuality plays a direct or uniformly causative role in the development of all transgendered or transsexual people. Similarly, while some trans people would undoubtedly prefer to disappear into mainstream society without ever disclosing their transgender status, many are unable to do so because of prejudice and discrimination. Many others believe we should not have to hide who we are in order to lead safe and productive lives. Ultimately, the fact that transgendered people have made a collective effort to find a political voice and to be reintegrated into GLB communities in the 1990s is the best evidence that they have larger social needs that must be met than those which can effectively be addressed by “passing for normal.”

One basic truth about trans people should be apparent by now. There is no one way to be “trans.” It is impossible to encompass an entire human being with any label. The only thing you can count on knowing about a person who is trans is that there’s a lot you don’t know. One of the great lessons of trans experience is the ability to let go of one’s preconceptions about other people. For me, the prefix trans is a signal to be ready for anything, to allow others to define themselves regardless of my own preferences in defining another’s appearance or characteristics.

## **SEXISM AND GENDER STEREOTYPING: THE ROOTS OF ANTI-GLB AND ANTI-TRANSGENDER BIAS**

Like discrimination against transgendered people, discrimination against GLB people is rooted in sexism and gender stereotyping.

- There is a strong and consistent relationship between anti-GLB prejudice and a desire to maintain traditional concepts about appropriate gender roles.
- Anti-GLB bias is based on and perpetuates the same stereotypes and oppressive practices that have long been used to deny equal opportunities to women and to keep men and women in their “proper” roles.
- Men and women who are perceived to deviate from traditional gender expectations are routinely stigmatized as gay or lesbian regardless of their actual sexual orientation.

As described above, gender identity is a person’s internal sense of being male or female. Gender expression includes all of the external personal characteristics that are visible to others: appearance, clothing, mannerisms, and behaviors. Sexual orientation refers to whether a person is attracted to men, women or to both.

Everyone, of course, has a sex, a gender identity, a gender expression, and a sexual orientation. Just how all those factors are related, or what causes any given individual to have the particular mix of characteristics that defines his or her identity, is not yet known and may never be known. What is known, however, is that **there is no necessary connection between a person’s gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation.** For example, a woman who would rather wear blue jeans than skirts is not necessarily a lesbian (or transsexual), just as a man who would rather wear feminine clothing than a suit and tie is not necessarily gay (or transsexual). In addition, the fact that a person is transsexual does not reveal or predict anything about his or her sexual orientation; some transsexual persons are lesbian, gay or bisexual, and others are heterosexual.<sup>16</sup>

In American society, however, a person’s gender expression is often mistakenly assumed to reveal that person’s sexual orientation. For example, men with feminine characteristics are often assumed to be gay, and women with masculine characteristics are often assumed to be lesbian. Transsexual people are often assumed to be lesbians or gay men who cannot accept their sexual orientation and who therefore undergo sex reassignment in order to “hide” or “deny” their true natures. These stereotypes are not only unreliable and untrue, they are dangerous. By creating an atmosphere in which anyone whose gender identity or gender expression varies from the norm is at risk of being stigmatized, shunned, or even physically assaulted, they perpetuate discrimination and intolerance.

Educating legislators and policymakers about the damage inflicted by sexism and gender stereotyping is a critical component of winning basic civil rights protections for GLBT people. Almost every family includes some family members who have been hurt or suffered discrimination because their gender identity or gender expression is “different” from the norm in some way—for example, a brother or son who has been ridiculed as a “sissy,” a sister or mother who was discouraged from pursuing a traditionally “masculine” career, a daughter or grandchild who has been harassed because of gender stereotypes on the job. When legislators and policymakers have an opportunity to

hear the facts about gender-based discrimination and to understand these facts on a human level, most will eventually be sympathetic to the need for enhanced legal protections.

## WHAT ARE TRANSGENDER ISSUES?

Transgender issues have many areas of overlap with gay, lesbian and bisexual issues, but there are also certain issues that are unique to transgendered people. Legal and medical issues are especially critical for transsexual people.

### Personal Issues

Much like coming to terms with one's identity as lesbian, gay or bisexual, coming to terms with one's identity as a transgendered person often involves a tremendous inner struggle for self-acceptance. Personal issues include:

- Shame, fear, and internalized transphobia and homophobia
- Disclosure and coming out
- Adjusting, adapting, or not adapting to social pressure to conform
- Fear of relationships or loss of relationships
- Self-imposed limitations on expression or aspirations

### Policy Issues

Like many other minority groups, transgendered people are often unable to engage in everyday activities, such as renting an apartment or buying groceries, without confronting bias and discrimination or being targeted by violence or threats of violence. In contrast to most other minorities, however, trans people rarely have recourse to any legal protection against discrimination in employment, public accommodations or other areas. Social issues include:

- Access to social services such as homeless shelters, rape crisis centers, medical clinics
- Access to education
- Hate violence
- Fear of repercussion or reprisal in retaliation for exerting one's ordinary rights, such as speaking out in public
- Chronic unemployment or underemployment
- Abusive treatment by law enforcement personnel
- Public humiliation, derision, ridicule, marginalization and exclusion
- Denial of employment
- Denial of housing
- Denial of access to public accommodations such as shops, restaurants, and public transportation

Because it affects so many trans people, hate violence deserves special mention. Based on data from 1995 to 1999, the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs Annual Report on Anti-Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Violence reported that **although anti-transgender violence accounted for only about 2-4% of all reported hate violence incidents, those incidents accounted for approximately 20% of all reported anti-GLBT murders, and approximately 40% of the total incidents of police-initiated violence.**

Ninety-eight percent of the reported incidents involved male-to-female (MTF) transgendered people.<sup>17</sup> As these figures indicate, hate violence against transgendered people tends to be particularly violent and brutal, and is disproportionately (though by no means exclusively) directed at MTFs.<sup>18</sup> Despite the seriousness of this problem, transgendered people are excluded from any protection under the vast majority of state hate crimes statutes, and violent crimes against transgendered people are often neither investigated nor prosecuted.

### Legal Issues



Legal issues can be complex for people who change sex, as well as for those who are gender variant. Legal issues include:

- Legal status as a man or a woman
- Marriage
- Divorce
- Adoption and child custody
- Inheritance, wills and trusts
- Immigration status
- Employment discrimination
- Access to public and private health benefits
- Protection from hate violence
- Identity papers and records (name change, driver's license, birth certificate, passport, school transcripts, work history)

Because the ability to obtain or retain a job is generally a prerequisite for obtaining housing and health care and for being able to support oneself and one's family, employment-related discrimination is a particularly critical issue for transsexual people, who

are currently unprotected against such discrimination in almost every state. When an employee discovers that he or she is transsexual and transitions (changes sex) on the job, employers often become very nervous and assume the worst, falling back upon a whole host of negative stereotypes and assumptions. There is a great deal of ignorance about the motivation and mental state of transsexual people. In the overwhelming majority of cases, transsexual people are competent and successful, providing they receive ordinary social support. Ostracism, ridicule, and other social barriers create situations in which anyone would fail. Not wanting to endure such treatment is why most transsexual people do not want their status known to others in the workplace. Increasingly, however, greater numbers of transsexual people are refusing to give up their careers and are transitioning openly on the job. As more transsexual employees are open about their identities and **as more employers have an opportunity to see that being transsexual has no relevance to a person's job performance, there is more hope for securing basic civil rights protections for transgender employees than ever before.** In the meantime, however, disclosing one's transgender identity or transitioning on the job still results in automatic and often permanent unemployment for far too many transsexual people.

### **Medical Issues**

Along with being able to find or keep a job, access to health care is undoubtedly one of the most critical issues for transgendered people, due to the extreme degree of discrimination against trans people in our health care system. Although some individual medical professionals have been advocates for trans people, the heroic efforts of individual providers are unfortunately outweighed by the pervasiveness of mistreatment and denial of treatment within the health care system as a whole. Medical issues include:

- Denial of medical treatment
- Ridicule and mistreatment by providers
- Inability to obtain ongoing, routine medical care
- Inability to obtain or pay for hormone therapy and sex reassignment surgeries
- Exclusion of transition-related services under Medicaid, Medicare, and private health insurance plans

Transgendered people routinely experience discrimination and barriers to obtaining medical services from hospitals, clinics, and private practitioners. Many providers treat trans people only with great reluctance, sometimes pointedly harassing them and embarrassing them, or condoning harassing behavior on the part of other patients or clients. Transgender writer and activist Leslie Feinberg has described many incidents of health care transphobia:

being turned out of an emergency room after the doctor in charge determined that hir anatomy was female, being called a “freak” by a resident, being told by a doctor that “the devil had driven her down the wrong path in life.”<sup>19</sup> (Feinberg prefers to use the gender-neutral pronoun “hir,” rather than his or her.) Many transgendered people avoid seeking medical assistance, even in dire circumstances, for fear of humiliation or rejection.

Transsexual people in particular can have difficult relationships with the medical system because once they are diagnosed as transsexual, insurance companies discriminate against them by excluding them from coverage for necessary treatments and procedures related to their transsexualism, as well as for any complications or conditions that may arise from these treatments and procedures. In addition, these exclusionary policy statements are often so broad in scope that they may effectively condone the denial of any medical treatment to a transsexual person. Stories abound of trans people being denied emergency (or non-emergency) care for conditions not even remotely related to transsexualism. Ignorant or prejudiced providers often assume that any adverse medical condition is a direct result of transsexualism. Even more stories of sub-standard care and neglect are easy to find at almost any transsexual support group meeting. Moreover, professionals who serve the transgender community may also become stigmatized by their peers because of their association with transgendered people, and this stigmatization, or fear of it, prevents many providers from serving transgendered patients.

## **TRANSGENDER RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS**

Basic civil rights protections for trans people ensure their ability to live and work as productive members of society. Even from a purely pragmatic perspective, the social cost of discrimination is much greater in the long run than the cost of inclusion. Antitrans discrimination forces many trans people into a deadly cycle of poverty and unemployment. It prevents them from putting their abilities and skills to constructive uses, and often forces them into illegal activities in order to survive.

Ultimately, however, the most compelling arguments in favor of providing transgendered people with basic legal protections are those rooted in our common humanity. Transgender rights are simply human rights, based on the recognition that transgendered people are human beings deserving of common respect and dignity, regardless of their appearance or their choices about how to manage the transgender aspect of their lives. Just as gay, lesbian and bisexual people wish to be treated fairly and respectfully, and not discriminated against based upon whom they love or their consensual expression of sexuality, transgendered people seek the same levels of social safety and security and the same affirmation of our inherent equality.

## II. Social Justice

Volunteers will have various perspectives on what social justice means. LVC understands social justice to be both working directly with people to meet their immediate needs of food, shelter, and education as well as working on the root causes of poverty, homelessness, and oppression. Part of this work is external, but part of it is also internal, which means being aware of our own experiences with oppression and privilege and being open to discussion about racism, sexism, homophobia, and economic injustice.

### Enclosed Readings:

**NOTE:** The following readings are REQUIRED pre-orientation readings and are found in the separate attachment “JICReadings” (JIC stands for Journey to an Inclusive Community.)

“Solidarity Not Charity: Racism in Katrina Relief Work,” Molly McClure

“Climbing the Up Escalator: White Advantages in Wealth Accumulation,” The Color of Wealth by Lui, Robles, Leondar-Wright, Brewer and Adamson

### For Reflection:

- If you have had experience working with marginalized persons, what are the most important things you have learned? What was most difficult and most hopeful about your experiences?
- Think of a situation in which someone you knew displayed unjust or oppressive attitudes, language, or actions. Did you confront the injustice? If not, what prevented you?
- What do you think are unjust systems or policies within the U.S. today? What would be the best way to work toward social change? How are you implicated in structural violence and injustice? How do you respond?
- What media sources do you depend on for information? Whose perspectives are represented?

### Additional Resources:

- Sojourners Magazine, [www.sojourners.com](http://www.sojourners.com)
- Suarez, Ray. *The Old Neighborhood; What we Lost in the Great Suburban Migration*
- Berry, Wendell. *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*
- Wink, Walter. “Can Love Save the World?”
- Dias, Robette Ann. “*Historical Development of Institutional Racism*”
- Biblical References: Matthew 5:1-12; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 15:11-32; Matthew 20:11-32

# III. Simplicity/Sustainability

Lutheran Volunteers strive to be intentional about the use of money, time and material possessions and to live in ways that value relationships over objects. Simplified living is a process of examining how our use of time, consumer power, and resources impact the earth, the oppressed and marginalized in our society, and our own quality of life. LVC expects volunteers to make lifestyle choices that are consistent with these goals.

## Enclosed Reading:

“The Garden of Simplicity,” Duane Elgin, The Simple Living Network, [www.simpleliving.net](http://www.simpleliving.net)  
“The Demand for the Common Good,” Jonathan Rowe, Yes Magazine, [www.yesmagazine.org](http://www.yesmagazine.org)

## For Reflection:

- In the last two weeks, how have you spent your time? How much of your time was spent in activities that refill and sustain you?
- How does your spending reflect your personal values and ideals? What criteria do you consider before making a purchase?
- What mode of transportation do you use the most? What challenges and benefits do you see in using public transportation?
- How big your “Ecological Footprint?” Fill out a quick assessment quiz at either [www.redefiningprogress.org](http://www.redefiningprogress.org) or <http://www.myfootprint.org/>

## Additional Resources:

- Elgin, Duane. *Voluntary Simplicity*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1993.
- DeGrote-Sorensen, Barbara and David Allen Sorensen. *Six Weeks to a Simpler Lifestyle*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1994.
- Risher, Dee Dee. “A Spirituality of Contentment.” *The Other Side* (July-August 1992).
- Longacre, Doris Janzen. *Living More with Less*. Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1980.
- For online articles and other simplicity resources, visit <http://www.simpleliving.net/>
- Find out about socially responsible investments, businesses, and products at [www.coopamerica.org](http://www.coopamerica.org)
- Biblical References: Matthew 19: 6-30; Mark 6: 6-11; Mark 8: 34-38; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 12: 13-34; Luke 21: 1-4

# The Garden Of Simplicity

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By Duane Elgin, author of Voluntary Simplicity.

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Simplicity of living is not a new idea. It has deep roots in history and finds expression in all of the world's wisdom traditions. More than two thousand years ago, in the same historical period that Christians were saying "Give me neither poverty nor wealth," (Proverbs 30:8), the Taoists were asserting "He who knows he has enough is rich" (Lao Tzu), Plato and Aristotle were proclaiming the importance of the "golden mean" of a path through life with neither excess nor deficit, and the Buddhists were encouraging a "middle way" between poverty and mindless accumulation. Clearly, the simple life is not a new social invention. What is new are the radically changing ecological, social, and psycho-spiritual circumstances of the modern world.

The push toward simpler ways of living was clearly described in 1992 when over 1,600 of the world's senior scientists, including a majority of the living Nobel laureates in the sciences, signed an unprecedented "Warning to Humanity." In this historic statement, they declared that, "human beings and the natural world are on a collision course . . . that may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know." They concluded that: "A great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated."

Roughly a decade later came a related warning from 100 Nobel Prize winners who said that "The most profound danger to world peace in the coming years will stem not from the irrational acts of states or individuals but from the legitimate demands of the world's dispossessed." As these two warnings by the world's elder scientists indicate, powerful adversity trends (such as global climate change, the depletion of key resources such as water and cheap oil, a burgeoning population, and a growing gap between the rich and poor) are converging into a

whole-systems crisis, creating the possibility of an evolutionary crash within this generation. If we are to create instead an evolutionary bounce or leap forward, it will surely include a shift toward simpler, more sustainable and satisfying ways of living.

Although the pushes toward simpler ways of living are strong, the pulls toward this way of life seem equally compelling. Most people are not choosing to live more simply from a feeling of sacrifice; rather, they are seeking deeper sources of satisfaction than are being offered by a high stress, consumption-obsessed society. To illustrate, while real incomes doubled in the U.S. in the past generation, the percentage of the population reporting they are very happy has remained unchanged (roughly 1/3) and, at the same time, divorce rates have doubled and teen suicide rates have tripled. A whole generation has tasted the fruits of an affluent society and has discovered that money does not buy happiness. In the search for satisfaction, millions of people are not only "downshifting" or pulling back from the rat race, they are also "upshifting" or moving ahead into a life that is, though materially more modest, rich with family, friends, community, creative work in the world, and a soulful connection with the universe.

In response to the unique pushes and pulls of modern conditions, in the United States and a dozen or so other "postmodern" nations, a trend toward simpler living has evolved from a fringe movement in the 1960s to a respected part of the mainstream culture in the 2000s. Now glossy magazines tout the simple life from the newsstands across the U.S. while it has become a popular theme on major television talk shows. Surveys show a distinct subpopulation -- conservatively estimated at 10 percent of the U.S. adult population or 20 million people -- is pioneering a way of life that is outwardly more sustainable and inwardly more spiritual.

Importantly, the simple life is not simple. Many, diverse expressions of simplicity of living are flowering in response to the challenges and opportunities of our times. To present a more realistic picture of the scope and expression of

this way of life for today's complex world, here are ten different approaches that I see thriving in a "garden of simplicity." Although there is overlap among them, each expression of simplicity seems sufficiently distinct to warrant a separate category. So there would be no favoritism in listing, they are placed in alphabetical order based on the brief name I associated with each.

1. **Choiceful Simplicity:** Simplicity means choosing our path through life consciously, deliberately, and of our own accord. As a path that emphasizes freedom, a choiceful simplicity also means staying focused, diving deep, and not being distracted by consumer culture. It means consciously organizing our lives so that we give our "true gifts" to the world -- which is to give the essence of ourselves. As Emerson said, "The only true gift is a portion of yourself."
2. **Commercial Simplicity:** Simplicity means there is a rapidly growing market for healthy and sustainable products and services of all kinds -- from home-building materials and energy systems to foods. When the need for a sustainable infrastructure in developing nations is combined with the need to retrofit and redesign the homes, cities, workplaces, and transportation systems of "developed" nations, then it is clear that an enormous expansion of highly purposeful economic activity will unfold with a shift toward sustainability.
3. **Compassionate Simplicity:** Simplicity means to feel such a sense of kinship with others that we "choose to live simply so that others may simply live." A compassionate simplicity means feeling a bond with the community of life and drawn toward a path of reconciliation -- with other species and future generations as well as, for example, between those with great differences of wealth and opportunity. A compassionate simplicity is a path of cooperation and fairness that

seeks a future of mutually assured development for all.

4. **Ecological Simplicity:** Simplicity means to choose ways of living that touch the Earth more lightly and that reduce our ecological footprint. An ecological simplicity appreciates our deep interconnection with the web of life and is mobilized by threats to its well-being (such as climate change, species-extinction, and resource depletion). It also fosters "natural capitalism" or economic practices that value the importance of natural eco-systems and healthy people for a productive economy, from local to global.
5. **Elegant Simplicity:** Simplicity means that the way we live our lives represents a work of unfolding artistry. As Gandhi said, "My life is my message." In this spirit, an elegant simplicity is an understated, organic aesthetic that contrasts with the excess of consumerist lifestyles. Drawing from influences ranging from Zen to the Quakers, it celebrates natural materials and clean, functional expressions, such as are found in many of the hand-made arts and crafts from this community.
6. **Frugal Simplicity:** Simplicity means that, by cutting back on spending that is not truly serving our lives, and by practicing skillful management of our personal finances, we can achieve greater financial independence. Frugality and careful financial management bring increased financial freedom and the opportunity to more consciously choose our path through life. Living with less also decreases the impact of our consumption upon the Earth and frees resources for others.
7. **Natural Simplicity:** Simplicity means to remember our deep roots in the natural world. It means to experience our connection with the ecology of life in which we are immersed and to balance



our experience of the human-created environments with time in nature. It also means to celebrate the experience of living through the miracle of the Earth's seasons. A natural simplicity feels a deep reverence for the community of life on Earth and accepts that the non-human realms of plants and animals have their dignity and rights as well the human.

8. **Political Simplicity:** Simplicity means organizing our collective lives in ways that enable us to live more lightly and sustainably on the Earth which, in turn, involves changes in nearly every area of public life -- from transportation and education to the design of our homes, cities, and workplaces. The politics of simplicity is also a media politics as the mass media are the primary vehicle for reinforcing -- or transforming -- the mass consciousness of consumerism. Political simplicity is a politics of conversations and community that builds from local, face-to-face connections to networks of relationships emerging around the world through the enabling power of television and the Internet.
9. **Soulful Simplicity:** Simplicity means to approach life as a meditation and to cultivate our experience of intimate connection with all that exists. A spiritual presence infuses the world and, by living simply, we can more directly awaken to the living universe that surrounds and sustains us, moment by moment. Soulful simplicity is more concerned with consciously tasting life in its unadorned richness than with a particular standard or manner of material living. In cultivating a soulful connection with life, we tend to look beyond surface appearances and bring our interior aliveness into relationships of all kinds.
10. **Uncluttered Simplicity:** Simplicity means taking charge of a life that is too busy, too stressed, and too fragmented. An uncluttered simplicity means cutting back on trivial distractions, both material

and non-material, and focusing on the essentials -- whatever those may be for each of our unique lives. As Thoreau said, "Our life is frittered away by detail. . . Simplify, simplify." Or, as Plato wrote, "In order to seek one's own direction, one must simplify the mechanics of ordinary, everyday life."

As these ten approaches illustrate, the growing culture of simplicity contains a flourishing garden of expressions whose great diversity -- and intertwined unity -- are creating a resilient and hardy ecology of learning about how to live more sustainable and meaningful lives. As with other ecosystems, it is the diversity of expressions that fosters flexibility, adaptability, and resilience. Because there are so many pathways of great relevance into the garden of simplicity, this cultural movement appears to have enormous potential to grow -- particularly if it is nurtured and cultivated in the mass media as a legitimate, creative, and promising life-path for the future.

Our evolutionary intelligence is now being tested. The choices made within this generation will reverberate into the deep future. Although human societies have confronted major hurdles throughout history, the challenges of our era are genuinely unique. Never before have so many people been called upon to make such sweeping changes in so little time. Never before has the entire human family been entrusted with the task of working together to imagine and then consciously build a sustainable, just, and compassionate future. Seeds growing for the past generation in the garden of simplicity are now blossoming into the springtime of their relevance for the Earth. May the garden thrive.

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# The Demand for the Common Good

by Jonathan Rowe

What happens when economic growth produces more “illth” than wealth? What happens when it gobbles up the foundation of the good life—the commons?

Since the first steam engine roared into action, people have worried about where the massive new machinery of the market was headed. In the wake of the Second World War, these questions took a new form: what is prosperity for? For the first time in human history, there was enough to go around, and more. So what would come next? Simply more TVs and cars, and their successor items? Or something different?

Probably the most eloquent statement of the question came in John Kenneth Galbraith’s book *The Affluent Society*, a best-seller for which Galbraith’s colleagues in the economics profession never forgave him. Galbraith observed that the reigning economic orthodoxy was formulated in an age of scarcity. All the gears were arranged to increase output, and this was assumed to promote the greatest good. But after two centuries of output frenzy, the problem no longer was scarcity. Rather it was glut. The challenge no longer was to produce enough stuff for the people; it was to get the people to buy the stuff produced.

This made the old mental mechanism obsolete. If it took a massive advertising industry to conjure up what economists quaintly call “demand,” Galbraith asked, did it really have the urgency that term implies? Was it even “demand” in any honest sense of the word? Since private consumption had become so dispensable, couldn’t a bit of that spending be shifted to the public sector, where the need indisputably was great—for

schools, roads, public transit, help for the needy and the rest?

This was the economic brief for post-war liberalism, and it remains valid to a point. America is still a land of private affluence and public poverty. There is still great economic need. When schools and libraries are begging for funds in the richest nation in the world, only a confirmed ideologue could deny that something is out of whack. But the answer has become more elusive. The old liberal approach meant priming the growth pump to produce revenues to fund public needs. The Right countered that growth alone would lift all boats and government wasn’t necessary. But either way, what happens when the rising tide itself starts to go bad, so that when it rises, a host of problems rise with it? What happens when yesterday’s answer becomes today’s problems?

In Galbraith’s day, need creation meant mainly the wants prodded by advertising, with its pervasive messages of deficiency and craving. Today that process has metastasized into a pharmaceutical industry determined to redefine every state and stage of experience as a pathology in need of “intervention.”

But the economy no longer just plays on the psychology of need. Increasingly it produces actual problems that more expenditure purports to solve. From cancers prompted by toxics in the environment to obesity and coronary ills caused by too much fatty food, for example, a good portion of the nation’s escalating medical bill is growth-induced. Just a few decades ago, hungry children were a subject of national concern. Now the big concern is kids who are fat and cannot focus their own attention.

Add traffic, noise, bad air, the breakdown of neighborhood ties, loneliness, stress—and on and on—and you have iatrogenesis on a systemic level, an economy that creates the problems it is supposed to solve. A

mechanism that was supposed to create wealth, and did for a while, now increasingly turns out what John Ruskin, the 19th century essayist, called “illth.” The tragedy—the Tragedy of the Market, one might say—is that it has to create problems and needs, or the gears will grind to a halt. Not all growth does this, of course. But the balance is shifting, and the result is something new, a period of systemic diminishing returns—diminishing not for a particular product or industry, but for the economy as a whole.

It is the kind of dilemma that defines nations and epochs. No one can say for sure how to resolve it, or even if this nation can. But this much is clear: a big part of the answer is sitting under our noses. It is the invisible economy called the commons, which is the part of life that is not the market and not the state, but is the shared heritage of us all. Some people hear the word and think of village sheep pastures in Olde England. But, in fact, the term includes the entire life support system and asset base, both natural and social, that we all hold in trust for those who will come after us.

The sky and oceans, the multitude of species, wilderness and flowing water and the like are commons. So too are language and knowledge, sidewalks and public squares, the stories and games of childhood, the processes of democracy.

The commons is a kind of counterpoise to the market. It provides stability and sustenance rather than restless appetite and craving. It connects to the “we” side of human nature as opposed to the market’s unrelenting “me.” The concept includes anything not owned but shared in common.

For centuries, economists have regarded the commons as a quaint medieval relic and mere fodder for the market (or, in the Soviet model, the state). In their creation myth, the commons is inchoate matter, a kind of economic primal sludge that awaits the vivifying hand of the market to attain reality

and life. Forests are worthless until they become timber, quiet is worthless until it becomes an echo chamber for noise, childhood is worthless until it becomes a marketing free-fire zone, ad infinitum.

### **The scarcity of the commons**

The commons is the submissive female in the old gender script, always available, ready to serve, asking nothing in return. Money is what really counts: progress and well-being—the good life—follow always in the train of the dollar bill. This is the conventional notion, and it actually seemed to work for a while. At the start of the industrial age products were scarce, the commons was abundant, and it easily could seem that the latter could serve as a supply depot and waste dump forever.

But things change, even if economic beliefs don’t. After several centuries of this, the nature of scarcity has shifted. Where once the products of the market were scarce, now it is the commons that is scarce and also most needed. Which is more lacking where you live—electronic noise or quiet, cars or clean air, malls or Main Streets where people run into neighbors and friends? Which would do more to make your life better—a high-definition television set, or neighbors who could take care of your kids and watch your house when you go away?

The commons is not a relic of a bygone age. It is a parallel economy that does real work. It produces the language we speak, the air we breathe, the conviviality of public spaces, the quiet that gives us rest. All are things the market tends to destroy. In fact, much market growth these days is not growth at all; it is the cannibalization of the parallel economy. If there is to be well-being in the future, we will have to reverse this trend. Economic policy will have to become commons policy as well as market policy; the government will have to do as much to promote the commons as it does now to promote the market.

To some degree, this is happening already under a different name. What is called “environmental protection” really aims at maintaining the productivity of the natural commons: clean air and water, the thermostatic properties of Earth’s atmosphere, space for quiet and recreation, and the like. The commons is the next supply-side, and it needs to become warp and woof of policy on a global basis.

For millions, this is a matter of basic sustenance. For example, in my wife’s village in the Philippines, people used to catch fish in the stream that runs through the rice fields. Plants grew at the edges that were excellent for such things as washing hair. But since the Green Revolution, with its chemical fertilizers and pesticides, the fish and plants are gone. People have to buy these now, which is a boost for the market but a financial setback for them. Thanks to escalating prices for chemical inputs and stagnant rice prices, the Green Revolution hasn’t been a great deal for farmers on the income side either.

That’s the myopia of economic policy that looks only at the market. A genuine economics would include the whole spectrum of supply. It would promote fish in the streams as well as rice in the fields, through more natural methods of fertilization and pest control, for example. This would help Third World farmers on both the cost and income side.

The subsistence commons is not a Third World anachronism, by the way. It is everywhere people don’t have much cash: community gardens in Harlem, fishing in D.C.’s Potomac River, the mosquito fleet of improvised trucks that comb San Francisco’s business district on trash nights to scavenge paper to sell for recycling. Air is a part of the subsistence economy that we all depend on. In most cities, pollution is worst where the poorest live. The subsistence commons is a global issue, not a Third World one.

Commons economics is about more than subsistence, though. It is an antidote to many pathologies of the old industrial model. Noise is an example. For centuries noise has been regarded as an incident of progress, an offshoot of the wonderful devices that filled the supposed void. Today Americans rate noise as the number-one urban problem—not crime or trash, but noise (which come to think of it is both.)

Quiet is not a mere amenity. People need it for sleep and concentration, both of which are in short supply. One study showed that kids who live in the quiet rear of apartment buildings do better in school than do those who live above the noisy street. The answer of the market is drugs for sleeping and concentration. Commons economics, by contrast, addresses the problem instead of numbing the sufferer. If the pharmaceutical industry is “productive” when it manufactures sleeping pills and Ritalin, is not quiet equally productive when it achieves better results at no expense?

Critics say such things as noise controls are regulatory obstacles to the economy. In reality they are economic measures that meet a real need. Once it is established that quiet is a commons, moreover, then it becomes a form of property, and those who violate it become trespassers. In this and other contexts, commons thinking turns the tables on the “takings” argument—the claim that regulations constitute a “taking” of private property and therefore require compensation. In reality, those who claim an absolute right to do anything with their property often are engaged in a taking themselves—of common property, such as quiet, clean air and water, and so on.

### **The culture of childhood**

The culture of childhood is another commons that has been degraded in the name of growth. Not long ago, kids played their own games. They were weaned on a common stock of story and myth that spoke to them at a deep emotional level.

Storytelling in families established a narrative bond between generations and provided a window to the adult world. Today by contrast this rich cultural ecosystem is dying. Kids are immersed in narratives constructed for the purpose of making them want things. They play games devised by corporations, and their toys are expensive high-tech devices in which the content lies in the thing rather than the child.

It is not coincidental that kids are petulant and overweight and have trouble focusing their own attention. The market offers more stuff to consume, such as drugs, counseling, and special diets. A New York City company called Zone Chefs caters special meals to overweight kids for \$866 per month. Economists regard all this, without irony, as “growth.” Commons policy, by contrast, would restore the healthful childhood commons. It would re-establish boundaries to commercial huckstering to kids—no ads in school, for example. Videos and TV shows with embedded ads—called “product placement”—would be clearly labeled so parents can avoid them. There would be time on television for parents to design their own messages to talk back to the ads. The raising of healthy children is no less important—no less an economic task—than is the production of televisions and beer. To protect children from commercial predators is not a crimp on the economy; it is a core function of the real economy.

### **The geography of somewhere**

If one thing sums up commons-based economic policy, it is community. The commons is a form of property that embodies the “we” side of human nature—the desire to connect with others rather than to stand apart. This side is increasingly repressed in America today, where even the simple acts of sharing computer programs or patented information in a university research lab have become criminal acts.

All commons provide a counterweight to such imbalance, none more directly than the

shared spaces of daily life. Life once was rich in occasions for such spontaneous human interaction. People shopped on Main Streets, visited on front porches and stoops, attended political events in public venues. Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas had their famous debates in county fairgrounds and town squares all over Illinois, and farmers and townspeople sat for hours in the heat and dust to hear. Politics occurred in common space, and this was related directly to the democratic culture that resulted.

Today, by contrast, most Americans live in suburbs conceived as staging areas for consumption. They move about in the hermetic enclosure of cars, and shop in the anonymity of malls, from which political and community activities generally are excluded. Political debates occur in enclosed settings before audiences of big shots. Most Americans watch at home alone. Then people wonder why they feel lonely and depressed, and why the sense of community has vanished.

A commons approach, by contrast, seeks to restore the opportunity for spontaneous interaction in daily life. It encourages development on the traditional village model, for example, with houses close together, front porches for visiting, and shopping within walking distance. It encourages mixed uses and granny flats instead of malls and sprawl, and it builds common spaces, such as community gardens, pocket parks, and benches.

Such arrangements often are called the “New Urbanism.” But actually they are the old village-ism, and they are incubators of friendship and civic engagement. Studies show that the happiest people are those actively involved in helping others. Spatial arrangements that encourage engagement with others can be productive of the happiness that people seek.

There are many other realms to which commons economics can apply, from open-source software and the public domain of



knowledge and artistic creation to public revenue. If we cut taxes on work and enterprise, for example, and imposed them instead on activities that expropriate or degrade the commons, then we'd have a healthier commons and market both. If we freed university research labs from the secrecy and paranoia that has come with corporate sponsorship and patent lockdowns, then the science would get a burst of fresh air.

The success of Linux, the computer operating system developed on the web by programmers around the world who contributed without pay, shows how a healthy commons enriches the market, while creating opportunities for creativity and conviviality that the market doesn't.

This is a template for the emerging economy: a thriving commons sector that both complements the market and provides refuge from it. The market will continue. It answers to a genuine need for initiative and enterprise. But the market will exist in equilibrium with this parallel economy that

does some things better—providing health, creativity, community, and freedom of a kind the market has begun to foreclose. The government will maintain the boundaries, and provide a structure of law and support for the commons just as it does for the market—no more and no less.

Officialdom's sacred measure of productivity and growth—the GDP—will expand to include the production of the commons. Citizens will get annual reports on the state of their common assets, just as shareholders get annual reports on the state of their corporate assets. This will mean big changes, not least for our friends in the economics profession. But they have gone to great pains in recent decades to urge the rest of us to accept destruction in the cause of their version of creation. Isn't it time we returned the favor and urged some change on them?

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Jonathan Rowe is director of the Tomales Bay Institute and a contributing editor of the Washington Monthly and of YES!

# IV. Spirituality

The Lutheran Volunteer Corps has many strong ties within the Lutheran community, but actively welcomes to people of all faith traditions and those who do not claim a religious affiliation. Personal prayer and meditation, small group sharing and discussion, and participation in a faith community are important elements of deepening one's spiritual life. LVC expects volunteers to explore and be open to sharing their unique expressions of faith within the safety and support of their communities.

## Enclosed Reading:

“Under the Influence,” Nancy Vernon Kelly, *The Other Side*  
“Reflecting Eden in Nuestro Jardin” by Steve Holt, *Sojourners*  
<http://blog.sojo.net/2009/06/01/reflecting-eden-in-nuestro-jardin/>  
“Spirituality and Faith in Lutheran Volunteer Corps”

## For Reflection:

- How do you celebrate your faith? What hinders you from spending time on your personal faith?
- Think of your experience sharing your faith in small groups. What do you contribute to these conversations? How does it enrich your faith?
- Have you had an opportunity to explore faith perspectives other than your current one? If so, what differences and similarities did you find?
- How do you plan to contribute positively toward your own and others' spiritual growth in your community?
- What spiritual resources can you draw on for sustenance as you live out the core practices?

## Additional Resources:

- The Other Side Magazine
- Belief.net
- Sojourners Magazine [www.sojourners.com](http://www.sojourners.com)
- Christian Century Magazine, <http://www.christiancentury.org/>
- Bender, Sue. *Everyday Sacred*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.
- Risher, Dee Dee. “Hope on the Edge.” *The Other Side* (July-August 1999).
- Biblical references: Matthew 5: 1-16; Matthew 6; Matthew 25: 31-46; Luke 10: 25-37; Luke 11: 1-13; Luke 14: 7-14
- Books by:
  - John Shelby Spong
  - Kathleen Norris
  - Joan Chittister
  - Thich Naht Hanh
  - Anne Lamott
  - Starhawk
  - Henri Nouwen
  - Jonathan Kozol
  - Merlin Stone
  - Chris Glaser

## **Reflecting Eden in 'Nuestro Jardín'**

by [Steve Holt](#) 06-01-2009

For the first time in my life, I have a garden.

Well, to be clear, my wife and I have one. And our neighbors help out quite a bit. And our friends – who know a lot more about gardening than we do – pass along the advice that keeps our plants alive and stop by to water our “little babies” when we’re out of town. Oh, and I should mention that we wouldn’t have a garden were it not for a group of Boston youth who came over and built our 8x4 box and filled it with fresh compost.

So it’s really not my garden, per se. It’s *our* garden. *Nuestro jardín*, as my Spanish-speaking neighbors say. Beyond the peppers, tomatoes, lettuce, and melons, our garden exudes life to our entire neighborhood, from the older women who come out of their house to gently place fragile seeds into the earth to our working class neighbors who will undoubtedly taste of the overflow of our harvest this summer.

As I watched the five or so urban teens build our garden and fill it with soil, it occurred to me that gardens — as much as education reform or neighborhood watch or summer job programs — have the potential to dramatically change the lives of inner-city youth. As youth experience the joy of eating food they planted, work with their hands on rural farms, and expand the network of urban gardens in our city, they grow alongside the crops they sowed.

Gardening has also taught me important lessons about sharing. I recently heard an interview with a Mennonite farmer in which he was asked about his first reaction to the economic downturn. The farmer responded, “Our first thought was that we needed to have a bigger garden.” Though

we’re several weeks from our first harvest, we’ve already shared seedlings with friends and neighbors. I am learning that beyond creating a cheaper source of good food for ourselves, gardening yields the opportunity to reach out and share with our neighbors.

All of this points to deep theological truths surrounding the practice of gardening. I love the poem by William Lawson:

What was Paradise?  
but a garden,  
an orchard of trees  
and herbs, full of pleasure,  
and nothing there but delights.

The three major monotheistic religions trace their ancestry back to an almost unbelievable story in which the earth consists of two human beings living in communion with their Creator — in a garden. Our diminished connection to our earth and each other perhaps has its origins in our disconnect from the garden. We no longer know the origin of our food, if most of it can even be called that. Waiting for good food is seldom an option. We rarely, if ever, venture into nature to marvel at, let alone smell the roses, as the well-worn cliché says.

Our garden — *nuestro jardín* — is reminding me that I am not the center of the universe. Despite my best efforts in building, planting, and watering, it is the Giver of All Life who gives the increase and harvest. I am but a mere tool — a trowel perhaps? — in God’s hand.

I am learning that to find a picture of what *shalom* looks like, we needn’t look farther than the garden.

**Steve Holt** seeks joy and justice in East Boston, MA. Steve enjoys gardening, being a husband, community life, and writing. He blogs about spirituality and his garden at <http://harvestboston.wordpress.com>.



# Under the Influence

By Nancy Vernon Kelly

It's Wednesday, and David says he needs a food voucher. A sweet and angry young man, he is once again in our face, begging for help. It is the era before people started lining up outside the church very early in the morning, before guidelines. We don't ask many questions. We give David a food voucher for Central Meat Market and invite him back to the church for supper later in the evening.

It's a well-worn script: He dances out the front door onto King Street, whistling to himself. He won't be at the supper. In fact, I know from experience that this is the last we'll see of him until a few days before the end of the next month.

This time, though, the script goes awry. I am wrong--so utterly wrong that I've been questioning what I know "from experience" ever since.

That afternoon, David Simon is back, a couple of hours before the meal is to start. Carrying a large ham under his arm, he cheerfully calls out, "Guess what's for supper?"

David (who has no money in the bank and sometimes doesn't have a roof over his head) is in the church kitchen washing his hands and vesting himself in a gingham apron. He's smiling like an angel, putting the ham he bought with the food voucher in the oven to share with all the hungry folks who will soon gather for supper. I am shaking my head.

Already Tim is setting up the tables and chairs like he always does. For the last hour, he's been cleaning up the cigarette butts outside the back door of this old church. Andy is hanging around in bare feet pleading with everybody who comes through the door to play crazy eights with him. Mary is arranging daisies in those cheap cut-glass vases that breed in church kitchens, and setting out candle stubs so we can dine by candlelight. The man who lives in the cemetery and celebrates his birthday every day of the year has his head down on one of the tables. Over by the stage, Bill is sitting backwards on a Sunday school chair playing "This Little Light of Mine" on his harmonica.

At about four o'clock, one Diane comes through the door bearing hot dogs and salad. The other Diane brings something made out of tofu. Jim brings a crisp made with apples sliced as thin as parchment. Andrew presents a dented tin of beef stew. Jason wheels in on his bicycle with buns from the Portuguese bakery. Meanwhile, some of the guys in the parking lot are kneeling on the asphalt shucking corn. The water is boiling in a big pot on the stove. In the oven, there are pig tails and a twenty-pound bird donated by an Old Order Mennonite farmer.

And David Simon's ham.

We haven't even said grace yet, and already I see hints

here and there. In the first place, it's so hard to tell who's who. There must be eighty of us in the hall by now, or aybe a thousand, and at 5:45 many hands deliver the food to the long table. We make a circle that reaches all around the room, and for one moment of deep-in-the-heart peacefulness, there's complete silence in the middle of the city.

"Anybody's birthday?" asks the woman who lets the children go first.

"Yee ha!" hollers another woman, the one in the cowboy hat. She's sitting on her motorized scooter in her usual place up close to the table. "I'm eight years old today!"

Some of the guys erupt in rude noises.

"Not my belly-button birthday! Eight years ago today I rose up from the dead!"

A wild round of applause goes up from the heart of the circle, and somebody runs over to the piano and starts banging out "Happy Birthday." Elaine's been sober for eight years, and who knows how many of the rest of us are living under the influence of resurrection.

Now we are ready. The woman who lets the children go first says grace, and as soon as the "Amen" is out of her mouth, Chris yells, "Go, Broncos!" like he always does. It's a little ritual we have, almost a cue for folks to start lining up on both sides of the table.

There are no rules to say David Simon can't buy a ham with his food voucher to share with a group of hungry people. And no rules to say Chris can't yell "Go, Broncos!" after grace. At least not yet.

Sometimes you just see more than you can see, and this is one of those times. I see him in a gingham apron leaning up against the wall by the kitchen--he's positively glowing. I see him in the slicing of the ham, in the breaking of the Portuguese buns. It's not supposed to happen this way, and it does. It's downright contrary and spectacular.

It happened one Wednesday night at the church downtown, one block up from Central Meat Market, in between the hospital and the high school, on the mainline bus route. It happened to a bunch of susceptible people. The man who lives in the cemetery and celebrates his birthday every day of the year. The blind Avon Lady. The man who can tell me how much I weigh on Mars, Venus, and Jupiter. The woman in the apron who cleans the bus station by day and does the best she can to raise her little boy. The man who sets up the tables and chairs. The woman who arranges contraband flowers in cheap vases. The eight-year-old cowgirl who rose up from the dead. The woman who lets the children go first. The man who bought a ham with his food voucher. Doubters, believers, dreamers and seekers, card players, stargazers, and me.

*From **The Other Side Online**, © 2003 *The Other Side*, September-October 2003, Vol. 39, No. 5.*

# Spirituality and Faith in Lutheran Volunteer Corps

Volunteers come to LVC from a variety of religious backgrounds. You may be a Volunteer because of your faith. LVC gives you a chance to live that out in service to others. Or, you may be in LVC because you care about the three Core Practices (Simplicity/Sustainability, Social Justice and Intentional Community), and would be interested in learning about other people's spirituality as a way of developing your own beliefs. It's also possible that you are in LVC even though you don't see it as closely connected to your spirituality. Or, you might not even think of spirituality and faith as being very important to your life right now.

Spirituality and faith are important components of the LVC experience. They give us a sense of who we are in the wider world, help us decide between right and wrong, and help us to know what our deeper purpose is in the world. In a sense, being connected to your spirituality and faith is like having power steering in a car. If it goes out, you'll still be able to get where you're going, but the journey will be a lot more difficult.

Here are our suggested definitions for spirituality, faith and religion:

**Spirituality:** an individual person's experience of and/or expression of a connection to "the divine."

*Example: Someone who connects her spirituality with the earth might experience that connection spending time in nature.*

**Faith:** Who or what we place our trust in.

*Example: Someone agnostic might put his faith in values like: respect for others and the environment, universal human rights, equality of all people, freedom of conscience, and commitment to family and community.*

**Religion:** A community of commitment.

*Example: A Jewish person might observe Sabbath at home with her family on Friday evenings, and attend a synagogue on Saturday mornings.*

Obviously, these might not be exactly the definitions that you're familiar with. We hope they'll be helpful, though, in conversations with your housemates and others in LVC. How would you define these three terms?

## The Core Practices as Spiritual Practices

If spirituality is our encounter with and/or expression of the divine, the spiritual practices are habits and paths we use to encounter or express our experience of that reality.

**Community:** Intentional community is a spiritual practice when we encounter the divine in one another. This encounter may come in terms of mutual care, healing, or through challenges to grow as persons. Living in community gives us the opportunity to express our experiences of the divine in words and service to each other.

**Social Justice:** Work for social justice expresses the fundamental worth of all human beings and of the earth and all life on it. By seeking to interrupt cycles of domination and exploitation, social justice looks beyond current human systems to a higher, divine vision for human life and purpose.

**Simplicity and Sustainability:** Simplicity in its many forms – time, space, energy, and finances, for example – makes space in our lives for our encounters with the divine, and the focus on those things most important to our faith. Sustainability connects us to the earth and all our fellow-creatures, human, plant and animal. Together, simplicity and sustainability give us a path to express our spirituality by caring for ourselves, one another, and the whole world.

## Walking the Tightrope

Lutheran Volunteer Corps was founded by Luther Place Memorial Church, is officially affiliated with the ELCA, and has many placements, supporters, staff, alumni and Volunteers who are also part of the Lutheran church. At the same time, from its very beginnings LVC has also included Volunteers, staff, supporters and placements from other communities of commitment, along with folks who are not connected to a religion.

This means that LVC is in some ways like a tightrope walker holding a pole for balance. On one end of the pole are LVC's connections to the Lutheran church with its rich history, traditions, theology, and institutions. On the other end of the

pole is LVC's commitment to including people of other religions, and people with a variety of spiritual expressions. If one end of the pole gets too much emphasis, we fall off. On the other hand, without the pole to balance us, we can't move forward.

You'll need to walk a similar tightrope when you talk about spirituality and faith in your house community. On the one end of the pole, your sense of clarity about and commitment to your spirituality and faith will give energy and interest to discussions. On the other end of the pole, you'll need to be open to truly hearing and accepting your housemate's beliefs and experiences to make respectful, community-building dialogue possible.

### **The Core Practices as Bridges**

LVC as an organization and as a community of people – Volunteers, alumni, staff, and supporters – shares a common set of values in the form of our three Core Practices. As mentioned above, these are: Simplicity and Sustainability, Intentional Community, and Social Justice.

The Core Practices can be a jumping-off place for you to talk with your housemates about spirituality and faith, and for you to grow in your own spirituality. Each person comes to faith and spirituality with a different perspective, but each of you has also committed to exploring the three Core Practices. In this sense, the Core Practices are like a bridge between you and your housemates. Each of you may be coming from a different shore, but you can meet in the middle by standing on the bridge and living out the Core Practices together.

*Example: A Jewish synagogue and a Christian church might work together to help build affordable housing. On the job site, people from the church and the synagogue have the opportunity to explain how their faith helps motivate them to do the work they're doing, and to understand better the differences between them.*

### **The Problem of the Empty Table**

Many Volunteers come to LVC hoping to grow spiritually. It is definitely possible to do this, but it is also possible to procrastinate and avoid addressing spiritual questions. By being a part of LVC, you commit to make spirituality and faith a part of your house conversations each month. But LVC leaves the decision to develop your personal spirituality to you.

What some Volunteers have found, however, is that when the time comes to sit down and talk with each other about their faith, many of them don't really know what they believe – they were hoping someone else in the house could give them some good ideas! This is a little like coming to a potluck without a dish, hoping that other people will bring the marshmallow salad, the baked beans and the green bean casserole, and finding out that everyone else had the same idea.

It's the problem of the empty table.

Our hope is that your year in LVC, and in particular your commitment to simplifying your time, will give you an opportunity to explore new spiritual practices. In the past, for example, Volunteers have used their year to:

- Read books about spirituality, faith and religion
- Develop a meditation practice
- Observe a day of rest/Sabbath
- Journal
- Learn about prayer beads
- Commit to a new church
- Practice daily devotions
- Visit different religious communities

Each of these practices – and many others – can help you have something to bring to the table.

# V. Food: One Intersection of the LVC Core Practices

Most issues and challenges of life don't fall neatly into one- or two-word categories. One of those issues is our choices about food. Where we get it? What do we eat? Who do we eat with? Do we share the joys and fruits of our kitchen and garden with others? Do our choices nourish our bodies and souls? Do they nourish our financial situation - personally, locally, or globally? This is one question (of thousands!) that taps into all the LVC core practices. What concerns do you have in addition to food that intersect with the three core practices of social justice, sustainability, and community?

## **Enclosed Reading:**

"Check Please!" Cathleen Hockman-Wert, Sojourners Magazine

## **For Reflection:**

When have core values of yours come into conflict with each other? How did you go about resolving such internal conflicts? Did you change which values you held most high? Are you comfortable with letting core values remain in conflict?

## **Additional Resources on Food Choices and Intersection of Tenets:**

- Other articles in the May 2006 "Food" issue of Sojourners Magazine. See [www.sojourners.com](http://www.sojourners.com).
- Rethinking Schools webpage on globalization books and resources:  
<http://www.rethinkingschools.org/publication/rg/RGResource03.shtml>

## Check Please!

### Our long-distance food system provides choice - but at what cost?

by Cathleen Hockman-Wert

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When global food shortages loomed 30 years ago, the Mennonite Central Committee asked its constituents to eat and spend 10 percent less on food. To help with that, the international relief and development organization produced *More-with-Less Cookbook*, which connects Christian faith with eating rice and beans. Eating more simply, cookbook author Doris Janzen Longacre argued, was not about “cutting back.” Rather, it meant “living joyfully, richly, creatively.”

[In] summer [2005], MCC released another cookbook that calls people of faith to connect values and eating habits. *Simply in Season*, which I co-wrote with Mary Beth Lind, promotes local, fairly traded, and sustainably grown foods, even if choosing them means spending more.

I approach these choices with no special expertise—I’m just an interested Christian consumer who wants to make decisions in line with my faith. And I confess that paying more for food goes against my North American sense of entitlement to cheap food and my inbred Mennonite frugality. My people believe thriftiness could give cleanliness some solid competition for that place next to godliness.

But what’s not to like about cheap food? Here’s the journey one devout penny-pincher made from spending less to spending for a better world.

**Food is food?** If one potato, pound of hamburger, or cup of coffee is basically the same as any other, it makes sense for conscientious consumers to choose based on price. Stretching dollars means having more available to help others.

For me the first step away from giving such priority to the cost of food came by seeing that each item has a story—and that the story behind one potato can be very different from another. Some stories are much more in tune with my values.

If we could read the whole story, we’d know where food was grown, by whom, under what conditions, and for whose profit. Chapters would trace the seeds’ origins and describe the transporting, processing, packaging, and marketing of our food. By the end, we would clearly see our food’s impact on environmental health, our local economies, our neighbors who farm, and on people around the world.

The book *Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things*, by John Ryan and Alan Thein Durning, outlines the story of a cup of coffee. When the book was published in 1997, I hadn’t heard much about small coffee growers struggling to survive in today’s global marketplace. But the way *Stuff* showed the environmental impact of one person’s coffee habit began to gnaw at me. At two cups a day, the authors write, Colombian farms have 12 coffee trees growing to support my personal addiction. And each year, they continue, Colombia’s rivers will swell with 43 pounds of coffee pulp stripped from my beans. There the decomposing pulp consumes oxygen needed by fish.

*Stuff* showed that choosing organic, shade-grown coffee protects the health of wildlife and farmers. Doing so seemed worth a few extra cents per cup. But while it seems understandable not to have known the story of tropical foods produced far away, I had much to learn about the different ways food is grown here in North America.

**The pollution tab.** Although conventional food systems are stunningly successful at producing inexpensive food, it comes with hidden costs.

Fertilizer-dependent monocultures—planting the same few crops on the same land year after year—deplete soil’s fertility and health. (In contrast, sustainable farming methods concentrate on building up the soil). They also diminish the natural defenses that biodiversity provides against disease and insect damage. Use of insecticides must be ever-intensified. In time we’re left with the striking image from Michael Pollan’s book *Botany of Desire*: a field of potatoes rooted in “a lifeless gray powder.”

In such conditions, erosion increases. The best topsoil is washed away, carrying with it unused crop nutrients and pesticide residues, which impact

wildlife downstream. They also can pollute well water, a health concern especially for pregnant women, nursing mothers, and infants.

The “pollution tab” doesn’t show up at the supermarket, but that doesn’t mean we don’t pay. In 1992, Cornell University professor David Pimentel calculated that U.S. farmers spend some \$4 billion annually on pesticides to protect about \$16 billion of crops. Doing so creates extra costs passed on to society at large—medical care for farm workers’ pesticide-induced cancers, fishery losses, the shortfall in honey production caused by dead bees, and more. The final price tag? Another \$8 billion.

Other conventional farming practices have serious consequences. Depletion of ancient reserves of fresh water and the loss of crop genetic diversity are just two. But aside from tolls on God’s creation, food’s story also includes costs in human lives.

**Oil in our food—and it ain’t canola.** A few years ago the “What Would Jesus Drive?” campaign noted that relying on imported oil from unstable regions threatens peace and security. Combined with vehicle emissions, this contribution to global warming threatens millions of lives, organizers said, and violates Jesus’ commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves.

I tend to think about my use of fossil fuels when debating whether to drive or ride my bike. I have been less likely to think about the role oil plays in the story of my food.

In conventional agriculture, fossil fuels are needed to operate farm equipment and produce fertilizers. Growing one calorie of food takes at least one calorie’s worth of fossil fuels. Food processing requires additional energy: Picture a half-gallon pitcher of gasoline next to two one-pound boxes of breakfast cereal.

Now add the “food miles.” Studies show that, on average, fresh produce travels more than 1,000 miles from field to U.S. table. This doesn’t include the circuitous routes food travels when, for example, California tomatoes are shipped to Canada to be made into ketchup for California consumption. Consider that if Iowans ate just 10 percent more food from their own state, savings in carbon dioxide emissions would total the equivalent of getting 500

cars off the road.

Local organic foods are wonderful alternatives to conventionally grown ones, but when it isn’t possible to find foods with both qualities, many sources today say go local. Start by asking how far this food has traveled. The Washington-based Cascadian Farm, a familiar brand of frozen organic foods, cozily references the mountain range east of my home. Yet a label check reveals edamame soybeans from China, cherries from Chile, and berries from Poland. Turns out Cascadian Farm was bought by General Mills. Which brings us to the next topic.

**Who profits?** Today’s global food supply is largely controlled by a few giant transnational corporations, such as Altria (Philip Morris), Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill, ConAgra, and General Mills. The major role these businesses play in the story of our food is obscured by the variety of brands that appear on a food product’s “cover.”

For example, in shopping for popcorn I might choose among Act II, Orville Redenbacher, Healthy Choice, and Jiffy Pop. Margarine to pour on top might be Blue Bonnet, Move Over Butter, or Parkay. All of these—and 60-plus other brands—are owned by ConAgra.

This is just the beginning. To varying degrees, transnational corporations own or have influence in the entire food production chain—farmland and farm finance, seeds and equipment, fertilizers and pesticides, grain collection and milling, livestock production and slaughtering, and more.

This is bad news for farmers. Agribusinesses determine the price growers must pay for essential inputs, such as seed, and set the price they get for their harvest. Between the two, the farmers’ profit margin squeezes hairline thin, while agribusinesses grow richer.

But the toll on the world’s poor is even graver.

**Cheap food reduces hunger?** This is where the story of food takes a sadly ironic twist for me, because I come from a religious tradition rooted in farming. In the 1870s, Mennonites famously introduced Turkey Red wheat to Kansas, now the “bread basket of the world.” With other people of



faith, we long to heed scripture's call to feed the hungry. You would think a system that produces an abundance of food would ease the suffering of "the least of these." Unfortunately, reality isn't that straightforward.

Much of the conventionally grown food from U.S. corporate farms is subsidized by our government in the form of price supports, tax breaks, and direct payments. As a result, staples such as wheat or rice can be sold at less than their cost of production. Corn—the most heavily subsidized American food crop—sells in Mexico for 25 percent less than it costs to grow.

This sounds good for Mexican consumers, but remember that in many developing countries, 60 to 70 percent of the population makes its living off agriculture. If cheap imports undercut local prices, desperate farmers are forced to sell their land and work for agribusinesses, which then control that land. If wages are inadequate, workers leave to seek jobs in urban areas, creating an influx of labor that drives down wages and increases poverty there, too. Hungry people can't afford to buy the food they need to survive.

As Tina Rosenberg wrote a couple years ago in *The New York Times*, "Wealthy countries do far more harm to poor nations with these subsidies than they do good with foreign aid."

It might seem that the answer is for farmers to find their own niche of specialized crops to grow for export. But small farmers cannot enter the global marketplace on their own. They need intermediaries to process, store, move, and market their produce. International trade agreement rules and swings in world markets result in highly changeable prices for export crops. Little profit trickles down from the corporations to those who produce the food.

Here we see the value of fair trade organizations such as Equal Exchange, a coffee, tea, and chocolate company. They ensure that producers get a living wage. Otherwise, the way to improve the lives of our neediest global neighbors is not by buying their food exports. According to Via Campesina, an international network of small-scale farmer organizations, the need instead is to support policies that re-establish small farmers' access to local

markets.

**Everyone eats.** Changing policies may seem beyond what many of us can do. But we all eat. We all make choices about the foods we buy—choices we can make and reshape through our faith.

I still value frugality. I'm still happy to eat rice and beans. My well-worn *More-with-Less Cookbook* points out that whole foods tend to be less expensive (and healthier) than processed convenience foods. And I rejoice when I see seasonal produce at my farmers market at prices competitive to those in the supermarket.

But price is no longer my first consideration. I want my food to have good stories. A priceless benefit of going local is that I can know those stories: I can ask my farmer.

Allocating more of our family budget for local, organic, grass-fed, and fairly traded food has meant having less money for other things. Yet I've come to see that willing sacrifice and joy can be two sides of the same coin. "Denying" myself imported raspberries in winter makes the local ones taste even more exquisite when they ripen in summer. And putting my money where my faith is feeds into a new sense of appreciation I've gained for food, God's unspeakably precious and delightful gift.

Grocery shopping is becoming a spiritual discipline for me. When I visit a farmers market, when I drink a cup of fairly traded coffee, I'm praying for—and directly investing in—a better world.

It's a new kind of more-with-less: Foods that offer a little more connection, and maybe a little less exploitation. More concern for all of God's creation, and a little less ecological harm. More stable rural communities, and less consolidation of wealth and power. More health for everyone. More gratitude. And even more joy.

*When this article appeared, Cathleen Hockman-Wert—co-author, with Mary Beth Lind, of Simply in Season, a cookbook celebrating fresh, local food—lived in Corvallis, Oregon, where she was an enthusiastic farmers market shopper.*

*Check Please!* by Cathleen Hockman-Wert. Sojourners Magazine, May 2006 (Vol. 35, No. 5, pp. 8-12). Features.