

THE POWER OF PERCEPTION:
BUILDING A BETTER WORLD, ONE ECOVILLAGE AT A TIME

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ABSTRACT

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The stories we tell ourselves about the world are very powerful things. Although these narratives are often invisible to us, cultural and personal worldviews influence perception and shape everything that people think, say, and do. Recognizing the transformative power of stories, my thesis explores the worldviews of ecovillagers. Proponents of ecovillages position these communities as healthier alternatives to mainstream Western settlements in terms of their physical impact on the environment, as well as the social, emotional and spiritual well-being of residents. My thesis explores these claims, as well as several related questions:

- How do ecovillagers describe their perceptions and experiences of the world?
- What aspects of their life experiences helped develop their worldviews?
- To what extent do ecovillagers in different communities share worldviews?
- How is spirituality experienced, described, and enacted by ecovillagers in their daily lives, and what takes its place (if anything) for non-spiritual residents?
- To what extent do the worldviews, values, and actions of spiritual and non-spiritual ecovillagers overlap?

To explore these questions, I use phenomenology with a mixed-methods approach combining participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and discourse analysis. My study sites included four ecovillages in North America where I lived and worked for a week at a time, engaging in many different aspects of community life. By doing this work, I seek to contribute to the growing literature on ecovillages, as well as to suggest several promising options for altering destructive cultural worldviews in socially just and environmentally sustainable ways.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	5
Definitions and Elaborations	5
What makes up a worldview?	5
Ecovillages and intentional communities	8
Making sense of spirituality	10
METHODS	15
Social Constructs and Physical Phenomena	15
Constructivism, Phenomenology and <i>The Spell of the Sensuous</i>	15
Data Analysis	18
RESULTS	21
Study Sites	21
Emerald Earth Sanctuary	25
The Farm	35
Alpha Farm	45
One United Resource (O.U.R.) Ecovillage	54
Interview Insights	59
Central Questions	60

What aspects of ecovillagers' life experiences helped develop their worldviews? ..	64
To what extent do ecovillagers in different communities share worldviews?	67
How is spirituality experienced, described, and enacted by ecovillagers in their daily lives, and what takes its place (if anything) for non-spiritual residents?.....	70
To what extent do the worldviews, values, visions and actions of spiritual and non-spiritual ecovillagers overlap?	77
DISCUSSION	81
So What's the Story?	81
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	87
Suggestions: The Sanctuary Concept	89
REFERENCES	92

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: This is an overall map of the ecovillage sites I visited as part of this project: Emerald Earth Sanctuary near Boonville, California; The Farm near Summertown, Tennessee; Alpha Farm near Deadwood, Oregon; and One United Resource (O.U.R.) Ecovillage near Mill Bay, British Columbia.....	23
Figure 2: Emerald Earth Sanctuary is located near Boonville, California. The site is about three hours north of San Francisco and an hour west of Ukiah, in the Anderson Valley.	24
Figure 3: Emerald Earth's website – EmeraldEarth.org – features a logo of a sprout growing from the earth, as well as images of moss-covered trees and blooming flowers.	24
Figure 4: The Farm is located near Summertown, Tennessee. The site is about an hour and a half south of Nashville.	34
Figure 5: The Farm's website – TheFarmCommunity.com – features pictures of the Tennessee landscape and short philosophical reflections about the community.....	34
Figure 6: Alpha Farm is located near Deadwood, Oregon, about an hour northwest of Eugene and 45 minutes east of the Pacific Coast.	44
Figure 7: Alpha Farm's website – http://members.pioneer.net/~alpha -- features a logo of a sun surrounded by a semi-circle of hands and a semi-circle of trees (upper-left corner).	44
Figure 8: O.U.R. Ecovillage is located near Mill Bay on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. The site is about 45 minutes northwest of Victoria, the provincial capitol....	53
Figure 9: O.U.R.'s website – ourecovillage.org – features a logo of a tree with swirling rainbow branches, as well as pictures of cob buildings and skill-building workshops. ...	53

INTRODUCTION

The stories we tell ourselves are powerful things. I begin with this point because in the course of everyday life it can be easy to forget that our worldviews, perceptions, and experiences *are* stories – stories about ourselves and others, about our relationships and memories, about who we are and where we’re going in this complex, confusing, and often contradictory world. And stories aren’t just constructs in our minds – we enact them in our lives as well, living them out in the ways that we choose to organize our communities, economies, and institutions. In the course of my life, I have heard many different stories about who we are as a species and what we’re meant to be doing on this planet, and I know from experience that some of these stories can take on larger-than-life significance, shaping mental and physical reality in powerful ways.

Gordon Bettles illustrates this idea clearly in his introduction to a book about Native American stories called *Salmon is Everything*:

When the newcomers arrived in the so-called New World, [the Biblical creation story] informed the way they saw the land and its communities. The natural resources – animals, vegetation, waters, minerals – seemed endless in this new land. It seemed to beg to be conquered, to be tamed, the newcomers thought. The land needed to be tilled, the meadows fenced, the waterways controlled, the mountains dug and mined. Transposed onto the New World, the newcomers’ creation story unleashed a harmful dynamic between people and the land, and one that was very different from the story that had sustained the tribes [of the Klamath Basin] for thousands of years. Believing the land was a resource, a commodity to be harnessed for the good of mankind, the newcomers fell into a pattern of exploitation without self-regulation. (May, 2014, p. xiii)

This recurring pattern of exploitation, pollution, and ecological destruction – driven by the cultural stories that shape Western worldviews and societies – has created

severe problems on many different fronts. Global climate systems are changing rapidly, weather-stabilizing ocean currents are in danger of shutting down, and sea levels are projected to rise by several meters as the ice caps melt, threatening huge disruptions to our ways of life (Hansen et al., 2016). As de Oliveira Arend et. al (2013) describe the current situation:

Population growth and our technological power to consume resources have increased exponentially [since the Industrial Revolution], placing ever greater demands on the Earth's natural systems ... Climate change adds further uncertainty regarding the resilience of the biosphere and its capacity to support human society now and in the future. *Clearly, the current trajectory of our global society is unsustainable and changes are needed to avoid collapse.* (p. v, emphasis added)

Examples of this sort of rhetoric can be multiplied endlessly, and even a brief look at daily headlines can lead one to feel overwhelmed by the scope of the problems facing us. How are we to understand the marvels and the horrors we see around us every day? As I thought about how to introduce my research, I found myself asking many of the same questions Cheryl Hall (2013) raises in her essay *What Will It Mean to Be Green?*:

What story should we tell ourselves and each other about the state of the physical world we live in, how it got to be that way, and what should be done about it? Should it be a depressing, scary story of humanity's violations of nature and our impending punishment for these violations? Or should it be an optimistic narrative of the ongoing quest for sustainability, a quest we're bound to succeed at? ... What story should we tell ourselves and each other about how we should feel in this situation? Should the story try to elicit concern, fear, guilt, responsibility, resolve, hope, pride, joy, or what? What difference might different kinds of stories make in motivating action to change the way we live? (p. 125)

As Hall goes on to explain, it turns out that the kinds of stories we tell ourselves make a huge difference in motivating action and inspiring social change. All too often, stories about humans and the environment present people with a message of doom and

gloom that produces only apathy, fatalism, and depression (Hall, 2013, p. 125). It seems that the more people hear about the destruction of the environment and the seemingly inevitable calamities predicted by scientists, the more they begin to shut down emotionally and psychologically. I have experienced this phenomenon personally, and I can attest that, as Hall makes clear, “‘information’ about the state of the environment is not the only thing that matters. More than anything, what matters is how information is interpreted, what meaning it holds for people” (Hall, 2013, p. 126).

With all that in mind, it seems to me that what people in the dominant cultures need more than anything else are inspiring new stories about what it means to have a fulfilling and sustainable life in the 21st century. As Karen Litfin (2014) puts it in her book *Ecovillages*:

Sustainability is not an option; it is the ground rule for inhabiting our home planet. Ecovillages have a big head start in figuring out how to make sustainability work. Ecovillages may not be *the* answer to humanity’s problems, but they are one of the answers, and we need all the answers we can get. ... I see ecovillages as seeds of hope sparsely sown across the global landscape. These seeds are small and time is short. It seems clear that we can’t all go out and build new ecovillages. We can, however, apply the lessons of the ecovillage in our homes, neighborhoods, cities, countries, and even internationally. The basic principle is simple: sharing – sharing material resources, ideas, dreams, skills, stories, joys, and sorrows. We don’t need to be in ecovillages to share. And if we did share, then our communities would begin to look like ecovillages. (p. 32)

Although ecovillages represent a small fraction of the social ecosystem in terms of population size and land area, I see them as powerful catalysts for changing dominant worldviews. Far from being cut-off and isolated, I found ecovillages to be highly interconnected and extremely porous in regard to membership, residency, and population. Guests and visitors were constantly arriving and long-term members were often preparing

to leave for other communities large and small, creating an incredibly rich and ever-changing mixture of personalities, ideas, and worldviews.

During the course of my research, I became especially fascinated by the spiritual aspects of the ecovillage movement, and I will focus on these dimensions in greater detail in the later sections of this paper. As someone who was raised by a Christian mother and an atheist father, I have always been interested in the power of perception to shape peoples' lives, and I see the worldviews being manifested in ecovillages as powerful stories combining science and spirituality. Litfin puts this idea eloquently:

Every culture enacts a story, whether tacit or explicit, about the nature of reality and humanity's place in the cosmos. At the dawn of industrialization, the story of humanity's separation from nature may have served a useful purpose, but that perspective is increasingly maladaptive. Our world hungers for new stories of belonging, stories that could spark a cultural renewal. Besides their material and social experiments, ecovillages are also storytelling laboratories. Within the diversity of their stories, I just heard one simple but profound core story that describes both humanity's plight and the solution. In a nutshell ... *the lessons we glean from ecovillages are not about what we can do but how we can be* (2014, p. 150, emphasis added)

I see great promise in the ecovillage movement for generating and testing out healthier, happier, and more sustainable stories about what it means to have a fulfilling and meaningful life in the 21st century, and I hope that by the end of this thesis readers will recognize that potential as well. Thanks for taking this journey with me.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions and Elaborations

Before reading any story, it helps to know the language that will be used and the context of the author’s reasoning. With that in mind, I’ll begin by defining several of the key terms that will appear throughout this work, followed by a brief overview of the literature that has influenced the development of this project.

What makes up a worldview?

Ninian Smart (1996) offers a useful framework for understanding worldviews in his book *Dimensions of the Sacred*, describing an “incarnated worldview” as one in which “values and beliefs are embedded in practice. That is, they are expressed in action, laws, symbols, organizations” (1996, p. 3). Smart identifies seven related dimensions that combine in various proportions to form worldviews:

1) Ritual / Practice – For religious worldviews, this dimension includes “worship, meditation, pilgrimage, sacrifice, sacramental rites and healing activities” (Smart, 1996, p. 10). For secular worldviews – which Smart illustrates using the example of United States nationalism – this dimension includes practices like “saluting the flag, singing the national anthem … [and] honouring past heroes such as presidents, poets, musicians and writers” (Smart, 1996, p. 14).

2) Doctrine / Philosophy – This dimension encompasses the formal and informal teachings emphasized by a given worldview, like “the doctrine of impermanence …

central to Buddhism” or the way in which the U.S. Constitution is seen as “enshrining the values of a democratic society, and loyalty to these values is an important mark of a genuine American citizen” (Smart, 1996, p. 13).

3) Myth / Narrative – The mythic/narrative dimension is often clearly visible in religious worldviews, but I believe that it is crucial to acknowledge its presence in secular worldviews as well: “In secular worldviews, and to an important degree in modernizing traditions, history is the narrative which takes the place of myth elsewhere” (Smart, 1996, p. 10). Historical narratives are usually presented as factual accounts, but upon closer examination they often turn out to be mythologized just like the creation stories of religious traditions. (For numerous examples of this process in action, see James Loewen’s book *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (1995), in which Loewen examines a dozen widely-taught U.S. history textbooks and finds that they contain factually-inaccurate, Eurocentric accounts of historical events.)

4) Experience / Emotion – For religious worldviews, this dimension is intended to encompass “the enlightenment of the Buddha, the prophetic visions of Muhammad, the conversion of Paul and so on” (Smart, 1996, p. 11). For secular worldviews, the experiential/emotional dimension “is found in reactions to moving national occasions, to celebrations of patriotism, to the singing of significant songs and so on” (Smart, 1996, p. 14).

5) Ethics / Laws – Smart describes this dimension by pointing out that “[a] religious tradition or sub-tradition affirms not only a number of doctrines and myths but some ethical and often legal imperatives. ... In modern national states certain norms of

civil behavior tend to be prescribed in schools" (Smart, 1996, p. 11). He also points out that in addition to the formal legal structure of the United States, "the ethical dimension is evident in puritan ideals, democratic values, and patriotic values" (Smart, 1996, p. 14).

6) Organization / Social Structure – The organizational dimension of a worldview "manifest[s] itself in society either as a separate organization with priests or other religious specialists (gurus, lawyers, pastors, rabbis, imams, shamans and so on), or as coterminous with society" (Smart, 1996, p. 11). In the example of U.S. nationalism, "the priesthood of the nation are perhaps the schoolteachers, who induct the young into the national myth; the saints are the heroines and heroes; other sacred people (in a way) are the military" (Smart, 1996, p. 14).

7) Material / Artistic – Finally, the material and artistic dimension "will express itself typically in material creations, from chapels to cathedrals to temples to mosques, from icons and divine statuary to books and pulpits" (Smart, 1996, p. 11). Concluding the nationalism example, Smart argues that the United States "incarnates itself in its material dimension: above all in the landscape ... but also in the memorials and buildings of Washington and other sacred spots, including the battlefields of the Revolution and of the Civil War" (Smart, 1996, p. 14).

For Litfin (2014), worldviews represent the "elusive yet all-important subjective dimension of sustainability" (p. 30). She argues that the commonly discussed pillars of sustainability – ecology, economy, and society – do not address "the inner dimension of sustainability, the deeper questions of meaning and cosmological belonging that have informed human existence for ages" (Litfin, 2014, p. 30). Thus, she includes worldviews,

which she also refers to as “consciousness,” as the crucial fourth aspect of her E2C2 framework: ecology, economy, community, and consciousness. (Litfin, 2014, p. 30-31). Litfin summarizes her understanding of worldviews by stating that “Ultimately, how I live outwardly will express who I am inwardly” (2014, p. 31).

Ecovillages and intentional communities

Robert and Diane Gilman coined the term *eco-village* in 1991, referring to these social and ecological experiments as “human-scale, full-featured settlement[s] in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world in a way that is supportive of healthy human development, and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future” (Gilman & Gilman, 1991). Andrew Kirby (2003) describes them as:

a radical alternative that synthesizes social, environmental and spiritual concerns through the creation of intentional community. It is the fusion of these elements that forms the core of the ecovillage ideology, and provides a focus for those who see conventional social patterns as unacceptable (p. 324).

In contrast to conventional towns and cities in North America, ecovillages tend to focus on creating egalitarian decision-making structures (usually consensus or consent-based governance); locally-focused economic systems (barter, community currencies and work-trade systems, as well as businesses run as cooperatives); and reducing members’ ecological footprints by producing as much energy and food as possible on-site (Kirby, 2003; Ergas, 2010; Trainer, 2000, Litfin, 2014).

According to the Global Ecovillage Network (2016), there are currently thousands of ecovillages of all over the world – 10,000 to 15,000, depending on how they are defined – with sites ranging in size from a few dozen people to a few thousand. The rapid

growth and proliferation of intentional communities over the past 50 years, especially communities focused on ecological sustainability, indicates that increasing numbers of people perceive these places and lifestyles as attractive alternatives to mainstream Western settlements, which are often perceived by ecovillagers as exploitative, dehumanizing, and unhealthy. Along with their advantages, however, ecovillages and intentional communities face many challenges of their own, including persistent problems with “agreements on a shared vision and understanding of the planning process, how to make decisions collaboratively and fairly, and economic decisions” (de Oliveira Arend et al., 2013, p. 8; Kirby, 2003; Metcalf, 2012).

Diana Leaf Christian (2003) estimates that more than 90 percent of aspiring ecovillages and community groups never get off the ground, and Meijering (2012) found that of those that do start, “half collapse within two years and half the remainder collapse after five years” (in de Oliveira Arend et al., 2013, p. 8). William Metcalf (2012), an ecovillage researcher and long-time resident of Findhorn community in Scotland, wrote that for the communities that beat the odds, “the key factor was not that members agreed on everything, avoided conflict, or even liked each other, but that *they shared a common vision*” (p. 26, emphasis added). Metcalf stressed that for social processes to work smoothly, it is necessary that “everyone shares the vision and is committed to reaching the optimum decision for the group, rather than just for themselves” (2012, p. 28). Based on the frameworks described in the previous section, I consider these shared visions to be synonymous with the concept of worldviews outlined by Smart and Litfin.

Despite agreement on the necessity for a shared worldview, gaps in the literature remain concerning the different forms these worldviews may take, and to what extent they may be (or must be) shared among ecovillagers. My research is intended to explore these gaps, especially in regard to the role of spirituality in the ecovillage movement. Spirituality is often cited along with social and economic ideals as a crucial aspect of successful ecovillages, but it is seldom well-defined or thoroughly discussed. In the following sections, I will offer a working definition of spirituality and begin to examine the role that this concept plays in the lives and perceptions of ecovillagers.

Making sense of spirituality

I would like to acknowledge from the outset of this discussion that there are multiple and conflicting definitions of spirituality, and that the term is heavily loaded with both positive and negative connotations. For the purposes of this thesis, I use the words *spirit* and *spirituality* in the sense that Fritjof Capra (1989) describes when he defines the human spirit as “the mode of consciousness in which we feel connected to the cosmos as a whole” (in Lincoln, 2000, p. 230). Spirituality in this sense does not necessarily require belief in nonphysical spirits, gods or other entities, but rather it describes an “ecological awareness at the deepest level [that] is the intuitive awareness of the oneness of all life, the interdependence of its multiple manifestations and its cycle of change and transformation” (Capra, 1989, p. 109).

Litfin (2014) summarizes the spiritual worldviews of the ecovillagers she interviewed in the following way:

Their spirituality is embodied and relational, aiming not for *liberation from* this world but rather for the *transformation of* it. ... Some ecovillagers spoke about being guided to their lifestyle by God, some spoke of communicating with plants and nature spirits, and some described themselves as staunch atheists. Amid these philosophical and religious differences, I was struck by their even deeper commonalities. From more than 140 in-depth interviews, I gleaned the following convictions that infuse ecovillage culture:

- The mounting ecological crisis is also a crisis of human meaning.
- The web of life is sacred, and we are integral members of that web.
- We can harmonize our lives with the web of life if we learn to co-create with nature.
- Community is an adventure in conscious relational living - ecologically, socially, and psychologically.

At the heart of these convictions lies one simple premise: that we are inseparable from nature - and the sooner we wake up to this fact the better for everybody. (p. 150)

In the following sections, I will describe two related frameworks for understanding the new – and renewed – forms of spirituality being manifested and enacted by the ecovillagers I met. To be clear, I do not consider any of these constructs to be the only correct way of describing these ideas. I present them here to be understood as different ways of describing similar experiences, along with many other valid and insightful systems I simply don't have the space or time to cover fully.

Dark Green Religion. Bron Taylor (2008) coined the term *dark green religion* to describe several emerging forms of spirituality that he views as distinct but related:

[Dark green religion] considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care. Dark green religion considers nonhuman species to have worth, regardless of their usefulness to human beings. Such religion expresses and promotes an ethic of kinship between human beings and other life forms. (Taylor, 2008, p. 89)

Acknowledging that there are multiple forms this worldview can take, Taylor draws some useful distinctions that offer a handy reference point for later discussion:

The first two types of dark green religion I consider to be forms of Animism, one supernaturalistic and the other naturalistic. The third and fourth types I label Gaian Earth Religion, which similarly appears in two forms ... “Gaian Spirituality” and ... “Gaian Naturalism.” All four of the above-mentioned types have fluid boundaries. They represent tendencies rather than uncomplicated, static, or rigid clusters of individuals and movements. (Taylor, 2008, p. 92)

In Taylor’s framework, “animism is a term that most fundamentally reflects a perception that spiritual intelligences, or life-forces, animate natural entities and living things” (2008, p. 92). This perception “is often accompanied by ethical beliefs about the kinds of relationships people have or should have with such beings or forces” as well as “respect if not reverence for and veneration of such intelligences and forces” (Taylor, 2008, p. 92).

Gaian Earth Religion is related but distinct, referring to holistic and organicist worldviews that conceive of “the biosphere (or the universe) as a whole, and the complex internal relations of its constitutive parts and energetic systems, as the fundamental focus or object of understanding and respect” (Taylor, 2008, p. 92). It’s worth taking a moment more to delve into the distinctions here, since Taylor offers a very lucid way of understanding where the differences lie:

What I label Gaian Spirituality is avowedly supernaturalistic, perceiving the superorganism, whether the biosphere or the entire universe, to be an expression or part of God, or Brahman, or the Great Mystery, or whatever name is used to symbolize the divine cosmos. This form is more likely to draw on deviant or non-mainstream or non-consensus science for data to reinforce its generally pantheistic or panentheistic and holistic metaphysics. It is more open to interpretations commonly found in subcultures referred to as “New Age.”

The form I call Gaian Naturalism represents a skeptical stance toward any supernaturalistic metaphysics. Its claims are more likely to be restricted to the scientific mainstream as a basis for understanding and promoting a holistic metaphysics. Yet, its proponents express awe and wonder when faced with the complexity and mysteries of life and the universe, relying on religious language

and metaphors of the sacred, albeit not always self-consciously, when confessing feelings of belonging and connection to the energy and life systems in which they participate, live, and study. (Taylor, 2008, p. 93).

Ecospirituality. Touching on many of the same points that Taylor raises, but focusing on synthesis rather than separation, Valerie Lincoln (2000) found in her research that a growing number of people describe their core values in terms of what she calls “ecospirituality,” a value system she defines as “a manifestation of the spiritual connection between human beings and the environment” (p. 227). Lincoln uses ecospirituality to describe “an intuitive and embodied awareness of all life [that] engages a relational view of person to planet, inner to outer landscape, and soul to soil” (Lincoln, 2000, p. 227). Seeking to explore common aspects of the ecospiritual worldview, Lincoln identifies five interrelated concepts that she labels *tending, dwelling, reverence, connectedness, and sentience*:

Tending is manifest as nurturing, caring, engaging, and participating with the world to access meaning and richness in life. ... This sense of tending encompasses[s] the spectrum of caring, beginning with caring for oneself to be able to care for others. One coparticipant characterized this as a sense of reciprocity: ‘taking responsibility for healing myself as an action toward healing the world.’ (2000, p. 235)

The concept of dwelling is grounded in taking measure, taking stock, thinking, reflecting, being centered, concentrating one’s perception, and being aware. It is in the process of dwelling that humanity has sought meaning and purpose. It is in the process of dwelling that the mystery of the beyond and the within becomes apparent. ... Dwelling provides space for transcendence. (2000, p. 236)

Reverence is evoked while rediscovering the mystery present in all creation, and is an embodied sense of the sacred and the awesome. Reverence is based in the awareness that humanity is telluric—in and of the earth. Reverence flows from the knowledge that the sacred is intrinsic and omnipresent. ... The reverent aspect of ecospiritual consciousness involves a sense of awe and honor while participating in proactive action toward the healing of self, other, and the planet. This path of reverence venerates nature. To live reverently is to deeply

respect and honor the integrity and rhythm of the universe. ... This is demonstrated in one's thinking, choices, actions, lifestyle, and prayers as well as political, social, and economic views. Ecospiritual reverence fosters the healing and reconciliation of self, other, and planet. (2000, p. 237)

Connectedness was expressed as a kind of organic relationship with the universe and the sense that the whole mystery of being is present in each individual part of the universe. Coparticipants indicated that they have had a general sense of being connected as well as discrete transpersonal moments in which they experienced a deep sense of unification and connectedness with all of creation. ... The holistic paradigm views the cosmos as an emerging, organic system of interrelated constituent parts. Movement and change in a holistic framework occurs through process, which has a ripple effect over the entire, integrated, connected network. ... Coparticipants ... described the mechanism of this sense of connectedness as an energy or a spirituality that manifests in the natural world. (2000, p. 237)

Sentience refers to a sense of knowing. ... It is with the essence of sentience that we are able to perceive and aesthetically sense this wonder and to describe it. It was through the sudden, certain knowing termed sentience that many participants came to their sense of connectedness. (2000, p. 238)

I see the frameworks described above as useful models for discussing and comparing the worldviews of ecovillagers. By comparing dark green religion, ecospirituality, and Litfin's summary of the worldviews of the people she spoke with, it becomes immediately clear that there is a great deal of overlap between these viewpoints, even when the specific terms people use to describe their perceptions vary widely. My research explores these areas of agreement through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and discourse analysis, and I will turn now to a full description of these methods, followed by the results of my explorations.

METHODS

Social Constructs and Physical Phenomena

Constructivism, Phenomenology and *The Spell of the Sensuous*

As Michael Talbot (1992) points out in his book *The Holographic Universe*:

In a universe in which the consciousness of a physicist affects the reality of a subatomic particle, the attitude of a doctor affects whether or not a placebo works, the mind of an experimenter affects the way a machine operates, and the imaginal can spill over into physical reality, we can no longer pretend that we are separate from that which we are studying. In a holographic and omnijective universe, a universe in which all things are part of a seamless continuum, strict objectivity ceases to be possible. ... [S]cience must replace its enamorment with objectivity—the idea that the best way to study nature is to be detached, analytical, and dispassionately objective—with a more participatory approach. (p. 297)

Recognizing this need for greater participation, my thesis is based in a *constructivist* paradigm, meaning that it “assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and respondent co-create understandings), and a naturalistic ... set of method[s]” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 24). In less academic terms, this means I acknowledge that my perspective is just one among many, and that every participant in an interaction creates their own understandings and meanings concerning the event. At its core, my thesis is based on ideas drawn from phenomenology, which involves attempting to identify the “essence of human experiences concerning a phenomenon,” as described by the people directly experiencing the events or processes in question (Creswell, 2003, p. 15). Seeking to understand these “lived experiences’ ... marks phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a method. ...

The procedure involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning” (Creswell, 2003, p. 15).

David Abram (1996) describes phenomenological research in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous* as an attempt “to give voice to the world from our experienced situation within it ... rejuvenating our sense of wonder at the fathomless things, events and powers that surround us on every hand” (p. 47). For Abram – and Edmund Husserl, who was one of the first to articulate these ideas in the early 1900s – phenomenology is not just a dry recounting of what other people have to say about their lives, but a way to

turn toward ‘the things themselves,’ toward the world as it is experienced in its felt immediacy. Unlike the mathematics-based sciences, phenomenology would seek not to explain the world, but to describe as closely as possible the way the world makes itself evident to awareness, the way things arise in our direct, sensorial experience. (1996, p. 35)

Abram builds extensively on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who argued that to return “to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside” (in Abram, 1996, p. 36).

I chose to employ phenomenology in this project because it offers a direct and experiential approach that suits my research questions well. Rather than employing questionnaires and standardized Likert scales, my methodology leaves open the possibility for surprises and changes in direction as new experiences shape my understanding of past and future interactions:

The ‘real world’ in which we find ourselves, then – the very world our sciences strive to fathom – is not a sheer ‘object,’ not a fixed and finished ‘datum’ from which all subjects and subjective qualities could be pared away, but is rather an intertwined matrix of sensations and perceptions, a collective field of experience lived through from many different angles. The mutual inscription of others in my experience, and (as I must assume) of myself in their experiences, effects the interweaving of our individual phenomenal fields into a single, ever-shifting fabric, a single phenomenal world or ‘reality.’ (Abram, 1996, p. 39)

In practical terms, I take these ideas to mean that there can never be a single objective description of an event or experience, and that all experience is necessarily subjective and personal. I have attempted to reflect this in my research, based on Creswell’s (2003) description of research in the social constructivist frame:

Individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences... These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas. The goal of research, then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied. The questions become broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation, a meaning typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons. The more open-ended the questioning, the better, as the researcher listens carefully to what people say or do in their life setting. (p. 8)

To develop engagement and observe these patterns and relationships, I used participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and discourse analysis (Creswell, 2003). By participant observation, I mean that I lived and worked with the members at four different villages for a week at a time, following up with additional contacts as I developed my analysis. While on-site, I participated in the life of the villages in multiple ways, including meal preparation and cleanup, gardening, natural building, tending animals, and sharing cultural experiences (listening to music, watching films, attending live performances, etc...). There were numerous opportunities for interaction every day,

and I learned a great deal simply by being present for meals, gratitude circles, council meetings, sharing sessions, and after-dinner conversations around the fireplace.

Informally, I spoke with dozens of people over the course of my research, and I conducted semi-structured interviews with as many residents at each site as were willing to speak with me on the record. By semi-structured interviews, I mean that I used guiding questions to keep the conversation moving, but I did not present the questions in any set order, nor did I attempt to use standardized phrasing. I did my best to follow the lead of participants when they spoke about the concepts that were important to them, and I made every effort to be open about my own position on these topics without unduly influencing their responses.

The discourse analysis portion of my research refers to the Results section of this paper, in which I describe the communities I visited based on their public statements found in websites, books, pamphlets, and other published materials. By quoting directly from these sources and analyzing how these statements relate to my own experiences and interviews, I have attempted to triangulate my findings by offering more context and a plurality of viewpoints, as expressed by the people living and working in ecovillages.

Data Analysis

Because my research was conducted with human subjects, I sought and received approval from Humboldt State University's Institutional Review Board for this project (IRB #14-231). To document my data, I used audio recordings and written notes of the observations and interviews I conducted, transcribing more than 40 hours of audio

recordings and dozens of pages of hand-written notes into digital text documents. I then entered the texts into an analytical software suite called Dedoose. Using the qualitative and quantitative tools provided by that software, I coded the interviews with key words for themes, phrases, and ideas that appeared repeatedly. I also developed codes based on Lincoln's ecospirituality terminology, Taylor's dark green religion concepts, and the new ecological paradigm (NEP) scale created by Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig and Jones (2000). In regard to that scale, Dunlap et al. (2000) argue that:

Recognition that human activities are altering the ecosystems on which our existence—and that of all other living species—is dependent[,] and growing acknowledgment of the necessity of achieving more sustainable forms of development[,] give credence to suggestions that we are in the midst of a fundamental reevaluation of the underlying worldview that has guided our relationship to the physical environment (e.g., Milbrath, 1984). In particular, suggestions that a more ecologically sound worldview is emerging have gained credibility in the past decade (e.g., Olsen, Lodwick, & Dunlap, 1992) (426).

According to the authors of the NEP scale, the purpose of that schema is to gauge ecological consciousness ranging from ecocentrism to anthropocentrism. I chose to include this system in my data analysis because early conversations with ecovillagers indicated to me that these concepts resonated strongly with their motivations and intentions in creating and/or seeking out alternative lifestyles.

By viewing ecovillages through these theoretical lenses, I am exploring the idea that they are a physical manifestation of people attempting to live out – however incompletely – more ecologically-sound worldviews than the ones currently driving Western ideas of progress. Dunlap et al. (2000) argue that anthropocentrism is slowly being eroded by ecocentrism, and they state that the processes through which this may be

taking place require further study. I consider this research to be an investigation of some of the processes through which this change may be taking place. In the following sections, I will present the results of my explorations and describe the sites that I visited, concluding with a discussion of my findings and suggestions for further research.

RESULTS

Overall, I conducted four weeks of participant observation, 23 semi-formal interviews and countless hours of research and discourse analysis in the form of browsing community websites and reading books, magazines and journal articles. On the record, I spoke with 13 men and 10 women, with ages ranging from 18 to 88. Informally, but sometimes at great length over several days, I spoke to dozens more people and was privileged to hear some of their stories, thoughts and ideas. While I cannot quote directly from these interactions, I will draw upon my memories of them when appropriate to raise additional topics and illustrate certain points.

In the following sections, I will begin by offering an overview of the sites that I chose to visit. In describing these places, I have relied primarily on the written statements of ecovillagers found on the communities' websites and in other published materials. This approach allows the residents of these sites to represent themselves to as great an extent as possible, and it offers some balance to my personal interpretations and observations, which conclude each section.

Study Sites

I chose the sites for my research on the basis of several related factors, including ease of access, longevity of operation, openness to outsiders, and the mission statements of the communities as described on their websites and outreach materials. Because I am

especially interested in the differences and similarities between the worldviews of spiritual and non-spiritual ecovillagers, I attempted to find two villages that described themselves in primarily spiritual terms, and two that used mostly secular terms. In doing so, however, I quickly found out that there is no clear dichotomy between these two poles. I met a diverse mix of people with widely ranging views in every community I visited, and the distinctions I expected to find dissolved as soon as I entered each site.

I would also like to acknowledge before diving more deeply into descriptions of these places that my impressions and understandings were heavily influenced by the timing of my visits and the unique mix of personalities present during my time in each community. Much like in a chemical reaction, the presence or absence of a single element can radically change the results of an interaction, and I fully recognize that the mix of human and non-human elements is ever-changing in all of these places. My impressions and descriptions, therefore, should in no way be taken as the final word on the successes or shortcomings of any of these places. I encourage anyone interested in ecovillages and intentional communities to seek direct experience and get to know these places and people for themselves rather than relying on anyone else's opinions or ideas.

With that being said, here are some brief summaries of the communities I visited:

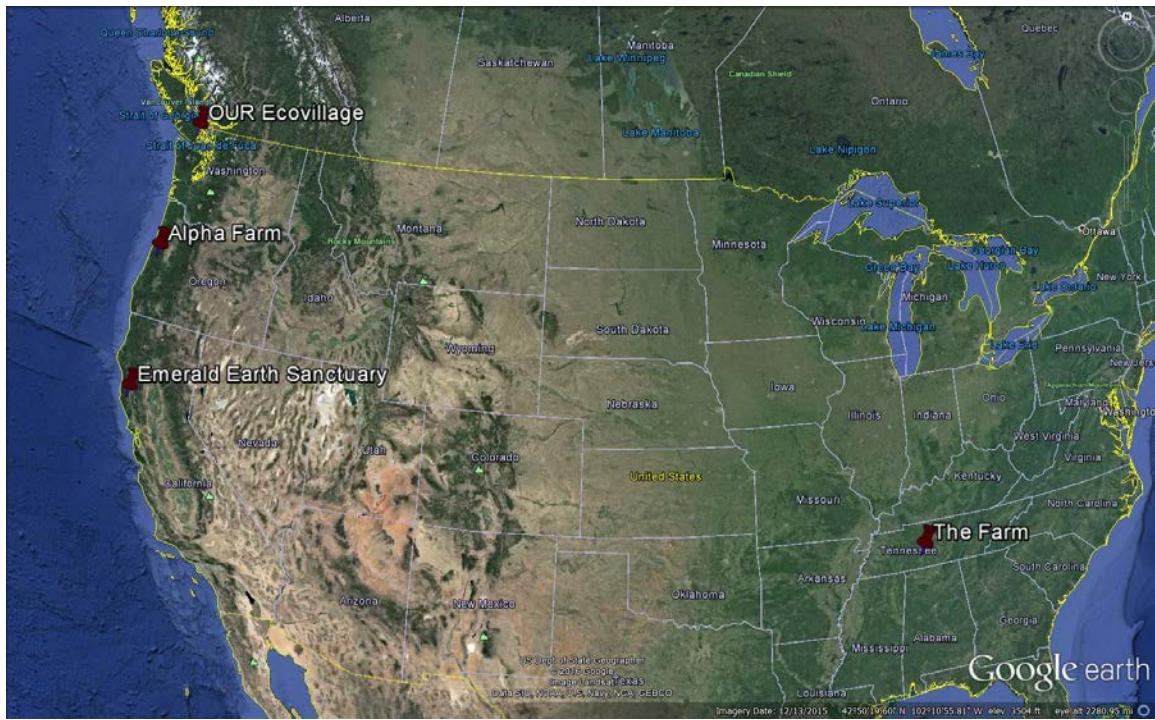


Figure 1: This is an overall map of the ecovillage sites I visited as part of this project:
Emerald Earth Sanctuary near Boonville, California; The Farm near Summertown,
Tennessee; Alpha Farm near Deadwood, Oregon; and One United Resource (O.U.R.)
Ecovillage near Mill Bay, British Columbia.

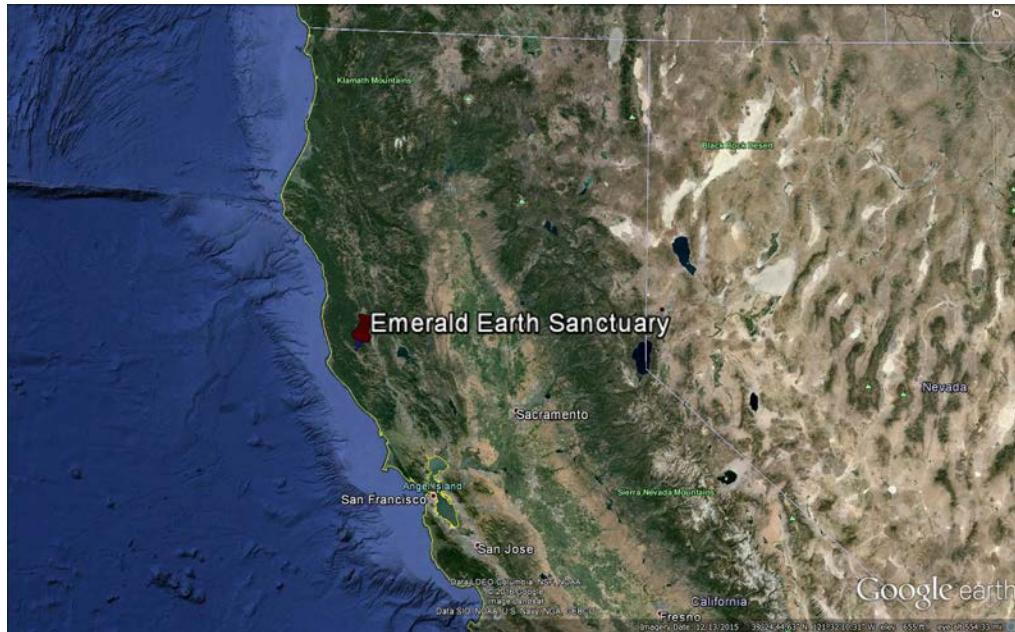


Figure 2: Emerald Earth Sanctuary is located near Boonville, California. The site is about three hours north of San Francisco and an hour west of Ukiah, in the Anderson Valley.



Figure 3: Emerald Earth's website – EmeraldEarth.org – features a logo of a sprout growing from the earth, as well as images of moss-covered trees and blooming flowers.

Emerald Earth Sanctuary

Geography. Located on 189 acres of former ranch land a few miles outside the small town of Boonville in the Anderson Valley of Northern California, Emerald Earth Sanctuary includes its own small watershed, running from ridgeline to ridgeline with a small pond in the middle of the valley and a seasonal creek flowing east to west. A description of the landscape from EmeraldEarth.org (2016) is summarized below:

The north-facing slopes are mostly recovering redwood and tan oak forest, much of it very steep. The south-facing slopes are mixed oak/Douglas fir/poison oak woodland with large grassy meadows. We are privileged to share the land with many kinds of animals, including deer, bobcat, owls, skunks, newts, frogs, ravens, hawks, foxes, hummingbirds, wild pigs, turkeys, and the occasional bear or mountain lion.

There are six small cabins, around 400-600 square feet each, built as sleeping and private space, with kitchenettes. There is a bathhouse/ greenhouse with a sauna, showers, garden greenhouse, and guest loft. All of these structures are made of a combination of straw bale, cob, light clay, and straw wattle, with natural plasters and finishes. The wood used was either harvested on site, reclaimed, or milled on friends' properties. The cabins are heated by passive solar and wood stoves.

There are no indoor toilets; we use composting outhouses. There is a swimming pond and two developed springs, which provide water for irrigation and domestic use. There is also a vertical well that was drilled in 2002. We recycle our gray water for irrigation. All of our houses are connected to electricity coming from solar panels, with a supplemental gas generator and a micro-hydro turbine in the rainy months.

Since we are off the grid, our only telephone service is via cell phone. We have two developed garden sites. We grow mostly vegetables and herbs. We also have a few old apple and pear trees that still produce, and have planted many more fruit and nut trees. We keep chickens, goats, rabbits and bees, and are open to more animals in the future, as a direct relationship with our food is important to us.

History. In existence for more than 20 years at the time of my visit, Emerald Earth has gone through a number of distinct periods in its history:

The community was founded in 1989, when a group of friends from Berkeley found and purchased the land ... This group called itself the Emerald Earth Laughing and Drumming Society and came together regularly for singing, drumming, and ritual, both in the city and on the land. They spent a couple of years cleaning up the site and fixing the main cabin and other infrastructure, then five people moved onto the land in 1994. During this time, the non-profit corporation Emerald Earth Sanctuary was formed and the land was deeded to it. After a while most of this original community moved away, although several are still members of the Land Council. One member of the original group remained as the sole permanent resident for several years.

Starting in 1999, a new group moved onto the land. With their experience in sustainable agriculture and natural building, they began building cabins, planting trees, growing food, expanding infrastructure, and organizing work parties. We are dedicated to sharing knowledge, and each year Emerald Earth hosts hands-on workshops in natural building, permaculture, and medicinal herbs. (EmeraldEarth.org, 2016)

Demographics. There were nine adult residents at the time of my visit, four men and five women, with three children on-site as well (two girls and a boy). Based on descriptions from the group's website, this population level seems to be about average for the community:

Over the years, the number of residents has fluctuated between six and 14. For the last few years, the membership has been relatively stable and small, although some new members have joined and some have moved on. ... Our ages range from 3 to 55, with a concentration in our late 30's/early 40's. (EmeraldEarth.org, 2016)

In addition to full-time residents, the site also has several dozen supporters living in surrounding areas and nearby cities who come out for celebrations and special events. The community hosts half a dozen summer interns per season who agree to work for several months in exchange for learning practical skills, as well as dozens of visitors each year who are interested in learning more about their way of life.

Economics. As a cost-sharing community, residents at Emerald Earth pay a small monthly rent (a few hundred dollars per adult resident, determined on a sliding scale) in exchange for room and board, as well as agreeing to perform work in the community to maintain power and water systems; plant, tend and harvest gardens; work with livestock; and build and upgrade infrastructure.

Although it is relatively inexpensive to live at Emerald Earth, the community so far generates very little income on site. Most members have worked at part-time jobs in the small town of Boonville (a 20-minute drive) or beyond. Some examples include: cooking, building, massage, consulting, teaching in the local school system, practicing Chinese medicine, or teaching natural building workshops. It's important to us to maintain a strong social and political connection with the larger Anderson Valley community. Our main on-site income source[s] have been hands-on workshops, drying seaweed (harvested at the coast), and raising livestock. (EmeraldEarth.org, 2016)

Several of the residents I spoke with indicated that there was considerable difficulty involved in generating enough income to comfortably sustain themselves, and the community was actively seeking new enterprises at the time of my visit.

Worldview/Vision. The residents of Emerald Earth describe their worldview and vision in the following terms on their website:

Our purpose is to honor the sacredness of the Earth and the interconnectedness of all things; to celebrate the rhythms and cycles of the Earth through ritual; to live simply; and to integrate work, play, spirit and activism. We believe that learning to live interdependently is an essential part of creating a sustainable and harmonious culture. We are committed to a radical transformation of our culture's destructive practices; creating and exploring alternatives; and actively working for social and environmental justice.

Our intention is to treat all people with kindness and respect, providing an emotionally safe and supportive environment by practicing honest communication, consensus process and conflict resolution. Our hope is to model and teach what we are learning about living in community and using our land and resources in environmentally sound ways. We hold this land as sanctuary for

healing the relationship between people and nature, and keep this land in trust for future generations.

Our key values include peace, sustainability, social activism, education, and consensus decision-making. We believe it is our responsibility as human beings to rediscover ways of interacting with the land in ways that enhance its ecological health, and we choose a lifestyle based as much as possible on biological power rather than chemical, more on social solutions than mechanical ones. (EmeraldEarth.org, 2016)

Personal Observations. Emerald Earth was the first village I visited as part of this project, and I arrived in the third week of June 2015, coinciding with the community's annual Summer Solstice Celebration. I was nervous as I left my home in Eureka, about five hours north of Emerald Earth, and drove into the sweltering heat of mid-summer. I had no idea what to expect, having never spent more than an afternoon at an ecovillage or intentional community, and I was both excited and apprehensive at the prospect of spending a whole week with people I hardly knew. I've always enjoyed meeting new people – despite a sometimes-debilitating case of shyness and a frequent need for solitude and personal space – and I find that having a project to work on helps my social anxiety by giving me a good excuse to ask people questions and find out more about their lives.

The Solstice event turned out to be an excellent introduction to life in the community, as several dozen supporters and former residents from all over the surrounding area drove up to visit Emerald Earth for the weekend. I arrived mid-afternoon on a Saturday, the day before the event itself, and I spent the afternoon and evening introducing myself to people and setting up my tent to camp in the woods near the community's pond. By the time evening rolled around, a crowd of several dozen people had gathered in the main dining area with groups of five and six seated at picnic

tables placed about the room. I had several interesting conversations with people who had lived on the site previously, and some who were interested in doing so, and I got lots of practice explaining what I was working on and why I was there.

That evening after dinner, much of the crowd reassembled outside around a campfire, and before long some people brought out guitars and drums and began to sing. The music was beautiful and the company was pleasant, putting my mind at ease about the coming days. The gathering died down with the fire around midnight, and I went to bed feeling grateful for the opportunity to have these sorts of experiences as part of my academic work. I awoke the next day pretty early and I wandered over to the pond to read a book for a few minutes before breakfast. I had just started *The Spell of the Sensuous* (Abram, 1996), and I was fascinated by the ways that he was able to use language to convey sensory messages and the potency of visceral experience.

As I tried to read, I became distracted by the heat of the sunshine beating down on my head and the drone of dragonflies chasing each other across the still, green water. I was surrounded by trees and tall grasses, and I felt extraordinarily peaceful despite my uncertainty about the rhythms and patterns of this new place. I sat on the sandy ground near the edge of the pond and read a few paragraphs at a time, pausing often to glance up at the cloudless sky and the shimmering trees and the dragonflies. The contrast between the black-and-white words on the page and the dazzling, vibrant world outside them struck me mightily then, and I questioned everything about my life choices in those moments. I chastised myself for not becoming a rafting guide or a survival skills expert or simply a hermit in the Canadian wilderness, and I felt utterly foolish for spending so

much of my time staring at books and typing on computers. I closed my eyes and let the warm breezes stir my hair while the sun lulled me into a lizard-like state of torpor, and I felt completely ready to sink into the earth and be absorbed. ...

I offer a few of these details not only to give some flavor and context to this narrative, but also to demonstrate in a round-about way how extensive, vast, and unwieldy a truly accurate recounting of these visits and experiences would be. As most people will readily recognize, describing a single hour's worth of time and experience could take up most of a day, and telling the story of a whole day could easily take a week. As for accurately describing the week-long experiences I had at each of these sites – well, the prospect began to seem completely laughable each time I tried to figure out how to encapsulate these experiences. I began to despair of ever being able to communicate a complete thought or idea at all, and for a long time I went back and forth with myself about the benefits of different approaches.

Ultimately, however, I decided that the best I can do is to dive in for a few moments here and there to add some depth and sense of place to these descriptions, and spend the rest of the time skimming the surface fairly quickly to give readers a sort of highlights reel of events. With that in mind, I will say briefly that the Solstice Ceremony later that day was both peaceful and powerful. It consisted of a short walk up a hill near the community's common house to a small plateau where a labyrinth was etched into the dry, dusty ground. A labyrinth is a special type of winding path that looks somewhat like a maze and is intended for walking in contemplation. Emerald Earth's labyrinth was surrounded by stones and crystals, with posts just outside its lines marking the four

cardinal directions. Participants in the ritual entered the labyrinth and followed its twists and turns in silent reflection, with instructions to bring a small token of some sort – a rock or shell or coin – to leave in the center as a symbol of behaviors and attitudes we would like to leave behind. There was a shallow bowl carved into the ground in the middle of the labyrinth that contained dozens of small quartz crystals, and we were given the option of selecting one as a symbol of new attitudes, behaviors and ideas we would like to embrace in the new season.

Upon completing the labyrinth, we gathered together in a circle and sang songs that emphasized unity, interconnection, and the power of natural forces acting in our lives. Several members shared brief statements they had written about the changing of the seasons and the cycles of the year, and I was impressed by the humble, no-nonsense mannerisms and approach of the celebrants, and the friendly, accepting attitudes that they projected. I felt comfortable and at ease despite the novelty of the experience and my own uncertainty about proper behavior. When the short ritual ended, the group walked back down the hill to enjoy a potluck dinner and another round of singing by the campfire. I felt a sense of camaraderie and acceptance that is sorely lacking in my general experience of North American society, and I wondered what it would take to transpose some of the warmth and openness I experienced there to the larger structures of the outside world.

The rest of the week passed almost in a blur, with events and conversations packed densely into the days that followed. I helped roll up wire fencing on a giant spool with one member as we talked about his decade of time on the land, and I discussed the intergenerational prospects for transforming Western culture with another member as we

walked two goats along forest paths so they could eat young shoots of poison oak. I learned to recognize the scream of a fox in the dead of night as it hunts or is hunted in turn – the call is truly terrifying, as it sounds uncannily like a human female screaming – and by the end of the week I felt as though I had passed into another world that bore only a mild resemblance to the one that I normally inhabit. I came to understand the powerful appeal of places like Emerald Earth that offer a tightly-knit community where a person's work is appreciated and valued, and I found it hard to imagine leaving to return to my own culture of alienated individuals and awkward, transactional relationships.

In closing this section, I'd like to note several aspects of Emerald Earth's social structure that struck me as especially interesting and valuable: While the community ostensibly shared an overarching spiritual focus and intention, I heard a wide range of interpretations and points of view expressed by the members I interviewed. Their tolerance for diversity and respect for a plurality of views was complemented by the coordination of shared ceremonies and cultural experiences, which indicated an active effort to establish a common vision and worldview for the group. I thought this approach was very effective and well-balanced. Members also gathered at least twice a day to share lunch and dinner, and they had frequent chances for interaction as they traversed the paths and roads of the site on foot. Shared meals are often mentioned in the literature on intentional communities and ecovillages as a vital glue that helps communities bond, and I experienced the value of this approach directly. Preparing and eating food, as well as cleaning up between meals, became natural opportunities to catch up with people and share stories, ideas, and points of view. In addition to the value of group dining, I was

impressed by the community's problem-solving techniques, which included a weekly gathering, referred to as a sharing circle, and ample opportunities for members to address and work through grievances as they crossed paths day-to-day. Simply having an established time and place to talk about interpersonal issues seemed to defuse a number of potential problems before they developed. Finally, I was amazed by the depth of knowledge that even the children had concerning the plants, animals, and insects that lived nearby. Almost every member I spoke to would point out useful species as we walked and talked, casually increasing my knowledge while exercising their own identification skills.

And so, as my time there drew to a close, I found myself both sad and relieved at the prospect of returning to my normal life. I had begun to crave the constant stimulation and immediate gratification of the world outside the fences, yet I knew that within a few days I would again begin to feel isolated and somewhat lonely. I found that I wanted a greasy cheeseburger and a sugary soda and several hours in an air-conditioned movie theater, but I knew as well that I would miss the smell of the sun-drenched grasslands and the calls of the birds and animals as I walked through the shady groves of oak trees. That week I learned firsthand how difficult it is to balance the conflicting desires in my own character, and how much hard work is involved in maintaining relationships with a dozen people on a day to day basis even for just a week.

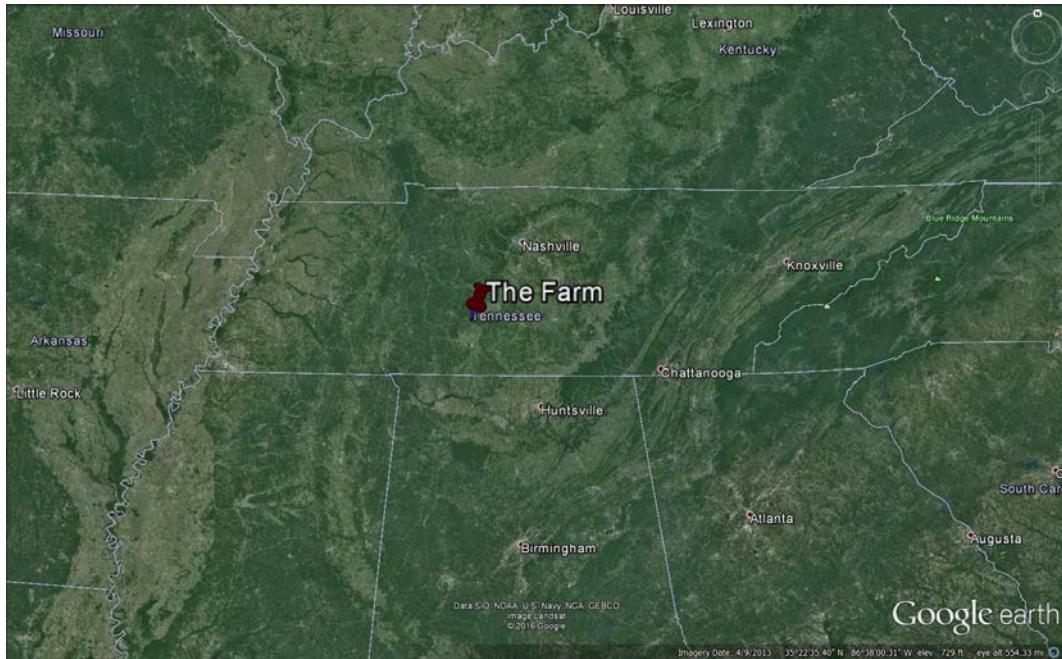


Figure 4: The Farm is located near Summertown, Tennessee. The site is about an hour and a half south of Nashville.

Figure 5: The Farm's website – TheFarmCommunity.com – features pictures of the Tennessee landscape and short philosophical reflections about the community.

The Farm

Geography. Situated on 1,750 acres in rural Grundy County, Tennessee, The Farm encompasses numerous microclimates and different types of ecosystems. Included below are several descriptions of the site from TheFarmCommunity.com (2016):

[The Farm] is 30 miles from the nearest hospital, 50 miles from the nearest interstate highway, and 75 miles from the nearest major city. It is also 35 miles from the birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan. It is on a windswept, barren limestone outcrop at the edge of the Nashville Basin. The formative settlement was built entirely from salvaged, recycled and local materials. ... Scrapped school buses and army tents provided shelter from below-zero temperatures until the sawmill could begin milling native oak and salvage crews could harvest old tobacco barns, factories, and condemned houses. ...

[At the Ecovillage Training Center] lush vegetation surrounds us during the warm months, birds are everywhere; frogs croak from pond to pond; thunderstorms add occasional drama to the expansive sky. Two outdoor solar showers provide wonderful luxury on a hot summer day, or on a clear starry night. Since they're located on a slope above the organic garden (with a 12' deer fence), the showers' greywater waste keeps our veggies happy. After flowing through the chicken coops and duck ponds, it eventually winds up as water hyacinths [sic] that are harvested in the fall, composted, and returned to the garden to make next year's food. ...

Follow the trail down the hill, and you're at lovely Swan Creek. Soak your feet, then head back up towards the Eco-Hostel grounds, where a geodesic dome, a 20-foot octagon, a Smoky Mountain shingled cabin, and one of the Farm's original caravan school buses contribute to the complex. Near the octagon is the laying yard for our gourmet Japanese mushrooms, primarily shiitake and oysters, but also including maitake, sulphur shelf, and pom pom. The surrounding five square miles of conservation trust offer ample foray area for the skilled wild mushroomer and we will bring in chanterelles, boletes, and a local reishi in season. (TheFarmCommunity.com, 2016)

With a huge amount of land to work with, many of the houses at The Farm are tucked away in the woods and are not visible from the roads. A gatehouse/bookstore at the entrance to the community provides visitors with a place to check in and pick up

information about all the various projects, businesses and nonprofits based there, and a small store on-site offers a selection of food with primarily vegetarian options.

History. – In 1971, a caravan of buses carrying 320 people accompanied teacher Stephen Gaskin from San Francisco to Tennessee in order to establish a new community based on a radical rethinking of mainstream values. Gaskin’s “Monday Night Class” in San Francisco had generated tremendous interest among people interested in seeking alternative lifestyles, and the group set out on a cross-country tour seeking like-minded people and affordable land. Below are some relevant passages about the community’s history from the Frequently Asked Questions section on TheFarmCommunity.com (2016):

In the mid-1960s, many people went through a cultural change that took them away from their roots and cast them adrift, searching for something better. Disillusioned by the Vietnam War, disturbed by increasing violence and injustice in the nation, encouraged by the successes of the Civil Rights and other movements, and empowered by the strength of their numbers, many gravitated toward the West Coast, looking for alternatives. A hysterical nation reacted to the Hippies by pursuing them in their homes and workplaces and locking them up in prison, where many remain today. In 1970, a caravan of more than 300 of us left California to start an experimental community where our ideals could find expression in our daily lives. At \$70 an acre, Tennessee gave us access to a large amount of land at an affordable price. …

On a budget of \$1 per person per day and no grants, no food stamps, and no welfare, the 320 original settlers bought the land, erected the buildings, and became agriculturally self-sufficient within 4 years. … Most of the early settlers of The Farm arrived with only the clothes on their backs and a pocketful of dreams. Many life savings had been spent to get to Tennessee, find and acquire the land, and make the first land payment. Racially, religiously and ethnically diverse and spanning as much as 90 years of age, the original group of 320 were harassed by racially intolerant neighbors and the clandestine infiltration of state and federal law enforcement authorities. …

Girded with ecumenical spirituality and an abiding sense of the utmost importance in their mission (the slogan on the lead bus of the caravan into the land was “Out to Save the World”), the group persevered through its adversities.

The first winter was marked by an outbreak of infectious hepatitis from a polluted stream. The second – known as “wheat berry winter” – is remembered as near-famine. But within four years The Farm had gained self-sufficiency in food production and established a construction company with more than 80 skilled craftsmen.

The Farm built schools, greenhouses, dry goods and grocery stores, and automotive, welding, woodworking and machine shops. It established child nutrition and sanitation standards, fire codes, and electrical, heating, lighting, and housing safety standards. Within five years it had founded a clinic, laboratory, dispensary, neo-natal ICU, and infirmary with more than 60 newly-licensed medical personnel and wide range of innovative programs in preventive medicine, serving not only The Farm, but the medically underserved area out to a 20-mile radius.

By 1980, the population had swelled to over 1200, but a series of reverses in agriculture and other enterprises led to a scaling back in the early ‘80s. “Human-scale” for that size parcel of land had been exceeded. Aware of their impact on the surrounding forest, the settlement cut its agricultural acreage by going to more intensive and permacultural farming methods, relocated outlying neighborhoods that impinged too deeply into the hardwood forests, and zoned off more than half of its acreage from all development other than management designed to encourage natural biodiversity. . . .

Back on sound financial footing in the early 1990s, The Farm acquired another 800 acres, which were similarly restrictively zoned, and established a charitable conservation land trust with the goal of acquiring and preserving the entire upper Swan watershed.

In 1995, The Farm helped to launch the Ecovillage Network of the Americas (ENA), headquartered initially at The Farm Ecovillage Training Center. ENA links together the efforts of a wide variety of green communities, Eco-City projects, and incipient ecovillages to make the way easier for future ecovillagers and to lay the foundation for a major shift in Western consumer lifestyles across the broader culture.

Demographics. – Home to about 250 full-time residents in 2016, The Farm also hosts summer interns, apprentices and thousands of visitors per year. There were quite a few children on-site when I visited, including more than two dozen inner-city kids from Nashville who were there for several days as part of the Kids to the Country program hosted by The Farm School. Overall, ages on The Farm ranged from 0 to 80+, with a relatively high concentration of people in their 40s, 50s and 60s.

Economics. – Throughout its history, The Farm has had quite a few active local businesses and nonprofit organizations. Although it began as a commune, with all income and expenses shared among members, the economy was reorganized in the early 1980s:

From 1971 to 1983, the Farm had a traditional communal economy like the Shakers or the Hutterites. After 13 years, we reorganized our economy, so that individual members could have the choice between simple membership and collectivity. ...

All members of The Farm are expected to contribute to the financial upkeep of the community through their earnings. Since our community operates like a small town, it has some of the same needs. We maintain our own roads, municipal buildings, and public water system. ... The level of individual contribution, which is usually between \$75 and \$125 per adult per month, is based on a budget that is drafted and re-drafted at town meetings and voted on, line-by-line, once a year.

In addition, new members are also asked to provide a one-time membership fee, which may be paid in installments over time. This money goes to our capital fund, which is used to maintain the land, improve the community's facilities, stimulate cottage industries, and otherwise help the Farm develop. ...

About a third of the adults in the community work in nearby towns to support themselves and their families. Some work as independent contractors, while others work in local shops and industries. The rest of us make our living within the community, working for homegrown cottage industries like the Book Publishing Company, the Birth Gazette, Village Media, the Farm Catalog, the Mail Order Company, the Soy Dairy, the Dye Works, the Tempeh Lab, and Mushroompeople. Others are involved in community services like The Farm School, the Farm Store, the Gate, the Clinic, WUTZ-FM, and our community government. Some of us work in global transformation efforts through Farm-based charities. (TheFarmCommunity.com, 2016)

Worldview/Vision. – The founders of The Farm avoided creating written rules and agreements in order to guard against dogma, but over time several elements of the common beliefs and agreements were codified. Included below are several general statements about the shared worldview found among many members of the community:

The Farm is a nondenominational church. We like to call ourselves ‘free thinkers,’ because we discuss religion and philosophy in terms that do not exclude any possibilities. People come to the Farm from a variety of religious traditions

and disciplines and find those views treated with honor and respect. While individual practices may vary, our group practice is an on-going, free-ranging discussion. We consider ourselves to be a spiritual community. In keeping with our deep reverence for life, we are pacifists, conscientious objectors, and most of us are vegetarians. On Sunday mornings many of us like to gather for group meditation and church services out in the meadow. . . .

Among ourselves we try to use agreement and mutual respect to generate a friendly working environment. We recognize that there are many paths toward realizing personal ideals and that people have a wide range of individual social values, but as a group, we do not accept the use of violence, anger or intimidation for solving problems. The fabric of our community is created by our friendship and respect for one another, and for our land. The institutions we have developed to organize our community have changed over the years and will probably change more. The Farm is not really what we are doing – it is how we are currently doing it. It is a process, rather than an end-result.

Although we make no claim that [this list] represents every person completely, we present it here to give you some concept of our original beliefs and agreements:

We believe that there are non-material planes of being or levels of consciousness that everyone can experience, the highest of these being the spiritual plane. We believe that we are all one, that the material and spiritual are one, and the spirit is identical and one in all of creation.

We believe that marriage, childbirth and death are sacraments of our church. We agree that child rearing and care of the elderly is a holy responsibility.

We believe that being truthful and compassionate is instrumental to living together in peace and as a community. We agree to be honest and compassionate in our relationships with each other. We believe in nonviolence and pacifism and are conscientiously opposed to war. We agree to resolve any conflicts or disagreements in a nonviolent manner. We agree to keep no weapons in the community.

We believe that vegetarianism is the most ecologically sound and humane lifestyle for the planet, but that what a person eats does not dictate their spirituality. We agree that livestock, fish, or fowl will not be raised in the community for slaughter.

We believe that the abuse of any substance is counterproductive to achieving a high consciousness. We agree to strive for a high level of consciousness in our daily lives.

We believe that the earth is sacred. We agree to be respectful of the forests, fields, streams and wildlife that are under our care. We agree that the community is a wildlife sanctuary with no hunting for sport or food.

We believe that humanity must change to survive. We agree to participate in that change by accepting feedback about ourselves. We believe that we, individually and collectively, create our own life experience. We agree to accept

personal responsibility for our actions. We believe that inner peace is the foundation for world peace.

Personal Observations. My visit to The Farm took place in the middle of July 2015, during a sweltering hot Southern summer. I stayed in the community's eco-hostel, "The Prancing Poet," which served as an anchor point for the developing Ecovillage Training Center. Somewhat removed from the permanent residences on The Farm, the ETC serves as a first stop for visitors after they pass through the gatehouse, as well as a gathering place for apprentices, interns, potential members and people simply curious to see what the community is all about. It featured several cob buildings in various stages of construction, as well as demonstration gardens showing different aspects of sustainable food production. I was fortunate to arrive during a multi-week Permaculture Design Course, and the instructor kindly allowed me to sit in on several teaching sessions and workdays with the apprentices.

In terms of participant observation, I helped with mixing and applying plasters to natural buildings, cleaning out storage areas to make space for new arrivals, hauling clay and sand for making cob, and working with the community's Kids To Country (KTC) program, which brings inner-city youth to the site to learn about plant identification, natural building, and much more. The most rewarding aspect of the week came during a KTC session, when I mistakenly agreed to cut a bamboo walking stick for one of the boys. I say 'mistakenly' because immediately after I finished the first stick, every Kid in The Country suddenly needed a walking stick as well. I spent the better part of the next hour sawing through a stand of dry bamboo with a broken handsaw, sweating profusely

and hoping against human nature that they wouldn't start using them as swords.

Fortunately, no one lost an eye or sustained any major injuries, and the memory became a pleasant one as I forgot the blisters and recalled the smiles of the kids.

Unlike the other three communities I visited, The Farm did not have a daily or weekly meal-sharing opportunity for visitors, or any established work schedule for passers-through. While I gathered that members and long-term residents met fairly frequently for potlucks and other social occasions and worked together on communal projects when the need arose, newcomers during my stay were generally left to fend for themselves in terms of meals and daily activities. While it was nice to have that flexibility and free time in some ways, it also made it much more difficult for me to meet long-term residents and establish relationships with community members. I was lucky enough to be invited to a few homes with the permaculture students to learn about soy tempeh making, bee keeping, and honey processing from some of the long-term members, but I was told that this was the exception rather than the rule for most visitors.

During my stay at the eco-hostel, I found a book in the library called *Voices From the Farm* (Fike, 2012) that offered stories from some of the founders and first-generation community members. It was a fascinating read, and I took away from it that the community had tried to do so many outreach projects so quickly in the early days that it had rapidly become over-extended. For instance, before installing plumbing and other basic infrastructure on their own site, many members had decided to travel to the Bronx in New York to start a free ambulance service, and others had rushed to Guatemala following an earthquake to help rebuild communities there. This idealism and selflessness

seems admirable to me in some ways, but it also caused serious problems at The Farm as people struggled to feed themselves and deal with sanitation in the early days. The community also made a point to take in refugees from mainstream society with almost no questions asked, and hundreds of newcomers arrived seeking to escape from traumatic lives that sometimes left them unable to cope with the demands of Farm life.

The contrast between the early challenges I read about and the functioning establishment I found when I visited was very encouraging, as it caused me to think about the fact that despite all the mistakes and miscalculations that had been made, the site has continued to survive and thrive, directly impacting tens of thousands of people. I'm sure not all of the people who passed through there over the years came away with positive impressions – in fact, one of the members told me that the economic changeover in the early 80s was like “a divorce involving hundreds of people,” complete with all the acrimony that entails – but I think the same could be said for almost any community or group of people. The fact of The Farm’s continued survival and prominence in the ecovillage/intentional community movement is testament to the fact that the members have been remarkably successful in solving problems and developing ways of dealing with the inevitable frictions of community life.

A long-term member I spoke with credited this success to a willingness to do “dharma combat” at any time – confronting people’s emotional and psychological hang-ups directly when they arose, rather than allowing personality conflicts to fester into larger problems. Essentially serving as daily or weekly group therapy sessions in which members gathered to discuss issues they were dealing with, this person told me that these

experiences helped to “winnow out” people who couldn’t handle that level of exposure or “mental nudity.” This willingness to take the time to deal with social problems head-on as a group seems to have served the community well, allowing people to get “comfortable within their own skin” and to call out anti-social behaviors before they cause major rifts (Interview G, The Farm, July 2016).



Figure 6: Alpha Farm is located near Deadwood, Oregon, about an hour northwest of Eugene and 45 minutes east of the Pacific Coast.

Figure 7: Alpha Farm's website – <http://members.pioneer.net/~alpha> -- features a logo of a sun surrounded by a semi-circle of hands and a semi-circle of trees (upper-left corner).

Alpha Farm

Geography. Located in rural western Oregon near a small town called Deadwood, Alpha Farm was the most remote of the villages I visited. Here is a brief description of the geographic features from the community's website:

Alpha Farm is located about 25 miles from the Pacific Ocean and about 55 miles by road northwest of Eugene, the nearest city. Dense, predominantly conifer forests cover these steep hills of the Coast Range of Oregon, fed by abundant rainfall in the winter and dry, moderate summers. The 280-acre farm is nestled in a green finger valley among these hills. Our living spaces include a large old farmhouse, the five-bedroom 'new house' built in 1980, and an assortment of cabins, cottages, yurts and trailers. Dining and general living space has been tight for this large family, but it has always been the community guideline that each individual have a private room. (Alpha Farm, 2016)

The site is accessed from a winding gravel road, with a recently reconstructed bridge leading over a rushing stream almost large enough to be called a river in its own right. A short driveway leads into a mostly cleared valley field, with a parking area to the right of the driveway and clusters of buildings located on a slightly elevated rise. A large farmhouse contains the communal kitchens – there are two – with a community dining room, living room, and music room downstairs. Upstairs are guest bedrooms as well as quarters for long-term residents, with two shared bathrooms, one on each floor.

Just south of the main farmhouse, a large community garden and orchard provided fruits and vegetables, and a flock of chickens roamed the property providing eggs and occasionally meat. The site also contained an outdoor kitchen for summer canning and large-scale food processing at harvest time, as well as a workshop area and sheds for tools and firewood. To the north of the main farmhouse, a storage building with

an office on the second story provided meeting space and a work area for using wireless internet and shared computers.

History. The members of Alpha Farm describe their 45-year history in the following way:

In 1971, four people in Philadelphia discovered a strong bond of agreement among them – an agreement that went beyond words. They shared a powerful spiritual ‘leading’ – indeed, a compulsion – to embrace like-minded people in intentional community and to have faith in the spirit they felt. They realized that the social and political activism in which they were engaged needed to be relinquished, and something drastically different and really quite simple needed to take its place. They wrote in a prospectus, ‘The renewal of the social order, we now see, must begin with ourselves. We seek to change our basic assumptions and patterns of daily living; to accomplish this we must alter our patterns of thought. We must live ourselves into the future we seek.’

They felt with a deep certainty that for them a rural, holistic community needed to happen, and quickly – and events seemed to coalesce to bring it into existence. Within one short year of that initial vision, the land was found, funds were raised, like-minded people gathered, and community life began. As though by divine design, the name for the community was discovered: The old homestead, it turned out, had once served as a tiny post office named Alpha. How fitting! Alpha, the first letter of the Greek alphabet, meaning ‘the beginning.’

Demographics. As was the case with all of the other communities I visited, the population fluctuated substantially from winter to summer, with interns, students, and visitors arriving with the warmer weather and increased workloads of harvest season. The website listed an average of 15 to 20 people on-site at any given time, though my visit in February 2016 coincided with the community’s slow season and the low end of the population cycle. There were 12 residents on-site when I arrived – all adults, five women and seven men. Their ages ranged from 18 to 80+. In addition to the full-time residents on the farm itself, several board members and many former residents live in the

surrounding area. Here's how the website describes Alpha Farm's demographics and membership process:

At Alpha, the value of commitment runs deep. A good number of the people who have lived as 'residents' for a year-long introductory period have stayed to become members. Our bylaws define the membership commitment as 'for the foreseeable future' and for the average member, this has been five to 10 years or more. Many people, too, have come for shorter periods, staying for a summer or perhaps a year, a welcome addition to the diversity of the whole.

There are five main categories of people staying at Alpha Farm: visitors, long-term visitors, interns, residents, and members. ... We are open to a wide range of new residents; however, we are most in need of committed community-builders: people who are mature, skilled, and emotionally well-adjusted, who have experience making and keeping commitments to a community, marriage/partnership, career, or children, and who are interested in making a long-term commitment to life in community. Good communication skills are a big plus, if not a requirement. ...

Because we function by consensus, at every point in the visiting process your progress toward residency or membership must be approved by the group. Visitors are approved by the community as a whole; new residents, by members with input from other residents, new members, and by the existing members. (Alpha Farm, 2016)

Economy. Residents at Alpha Farm do not pay to live in the community, but they agree to work full-time at a wide range of shared tasks in order to earn income for the group, as well as a small monthly personal stipend:

Economically, we place greater trust in the strength and stability of an integrated cooperative living/working group than in separate, competing economic units. Recent American experience has bestowed prosperity on many, but some of us remember it not always being so and are concerned for the future. We are of the opinion that a family-like sharing of our resources and skills affords greater security than bank accounts or individual property. This, of course, presupposes a spiritually and psychologically integrated 'family,' complete with love, care, and responsibility of a true family.

Without retreating into economic isolation, we wish to retrieve some of the self-sufficiency of our lives which is made impossible as single individuals in a society sharply dependant [*sic*] on technology. Technology has made obsolete the romantic era of the pioneer; technology has even made obsolete the notion of

a genuinely self-sufficient nuclear family. A measure of self-sufficiency today can be accomplished only as a group. ...

Most community members do a variety of work, both through our community-owned businesses and on the farm. Our businesses are Alpha-Bit, a café/ bookstore/gift shop in nearby Mapleton (a half-hour drive); Alpha Mail, through which we operate rural mail routes under contract from the U.S. Postal Service; and Alpha Institute, through which we practice and teach consensus decision making and meeting facilitation.

On the farm, we do an even wider variety of work ranging from office work (including bookkeeping and accounting), auto maintenance, general maintenance, occasional construction projects to working in the garden and fields, care of our dairy animals (and chickens when we have them), bees, orchard, farm equipment maintenance, food preservation, shopping, child care, grounds maintenance, flower and herb gardens.

Our work expectation is 40 hours a week, though many people work more than that, because between a farm and self-employment, there is no end of tasks to be done. Most residents and members work at least two days a week in one of our businesses and the rest of their time on the farm. Visitors usually begin by working on the farm, and add work in one of our businesses if they are exploring residency. ...

Occasionally new residents join Alpha who have established artisan or freelance businesses that they bring with them. These often can be accommodated, on a case-by-case basis, by meeting with our residency team. Otherwise we encourage new residents to work on the farm or through Alpha businesses so they can integrate well into the community.

Because we are an income-sharing community, all income comes to the community, which in turn pays for everyone's needs and provides a small allowance for personal desires like entertainment and long-distance phone calls. When you become a resident, however, all assets and liabilities are your own. If you come with savings, it is yours to spend as you wish, though we encourage people to live as close as possible to the community standard of living, so that they can get a sense of whether they could live as members. If you come with debts, they also are your responsibility; your individual situation will be discussed with the residency team to see if we can work out a solution. (Alpha Farm, 2016)

Worldview/Vision. The members of Alpha Farm express their common mission and vision in the following terms:

Our purpose is to create a holistic community in harmony with each other and the earth, sharing along the way with the wider community and society. It would be easy, one might think, to become self-indulgent at Alpha; to enjoy life and forget the rest of the world. Yet the purpose of Alpha is not to escape the world, but to

answer it – most simply by actively taking responsibility for the part of the world that we touch. It involves becoming more whole. And despite being in the country, our connectedness with society as a group is greater than it ever was for us as individuals. Alpha participates in many gatherings, conferences and conversations, small and large, at the farm and elsewhere. An enlarging network of friends and groups is, each in its own way, contributing to what we sense is an evolving consciousness. Many people are seeking to live more fruitfully and with increased integrity, and by their doing so, the patterns for a more integrated and harmonious era are unfolding. ...

Each of us has spent years in the city living, working and hoping for its revitalization. We have major portions of our lives and energies working for peace and social change. We have come to realize, however, that our work, while necessary and gripping, is outwardly focused. We have sought to change the minds, hearts and actions of others, but we now see that the renewal of the social order must begin with ourselves. As a result, we seek to change our basic assumptions and patterns of daily living. To accomplish this we must live ourselves into the future we seek.

Socially we envision a modified style of family life that overcomes the isolation and rigid classifications of single persons, couples, and separate families. We intend to encourage and succor nuclear families in Alpha; and we consider physical privacy for each individual to be an elementary right and need. Simultaneously we seek to correct the isolation and built-in tensions of the nuclear family which has [*sic*] occurred in the industrial age. Children and adults alike need to share emotional and physical support with more than one or two individuals. Community members of all ages should participate together in the living and growing of each other. ...

We do expect each individual, however, to be open to moving with spiritual values as part of living. ... Expressions of spirit at Alpha have covered a wide range: Quaker meetings, yoga, drum circles, Sufi dancing, shared readings and discussion from different traditions, and celebration of Earth-centered, Jewish and Christian holidays. Over time we find that spirituality has become more implicit than explicit at Alpha. We speak of spirit less than we did in Alpha's early days. Yet it still is clearly present among us – in the holding of hands before dinner, in a song shared, in a moment of silence before meeting, in the way we seek to treat each other. One might say that our group "spiritual practice" is actually to express, moment to moment in our work and our relations with others, qualities of cooperation, respect, nurturance and helpfulness.

Personal Observations. I visited Alpha Farm in the first week of February 2016, during a rainy and cool transitional period from winter to spring. Upon arriving I immediately encountered some of the community members cleaning out a storage

building near the parking area, so I introduced myself and offered to help if they needed extra hands. They pointed me to my quarters in the main farmhouse and told me to get settled in and then come out to help if I still felt so inclined. I grabbed my bags and found my room upstairs, then changed into work clothes and boots. I went back out and began helping to move furniture and old documents, as several elder community members directed the operations and helped to make sense of the accumulated goods of almost half a century.

I mention all this because the task became a sort of metaphor for me of the larger environmental challenges represented by global warming and the accumulated pollution of industrial civilization. When I resumed working on clearing out that storage shed the next day as part of my volunteer agreement, I soon found myself sweeping up rat feces and cleaning out nests that had been undisturbed for many years. I had had no part in creating the mess I was tasked with cleaning up, yet it still fell to me to get to work and do my best to help make that small part of the world a more pleasant place to be. Perhaps I was merely projecting – or practicing mental escapism to make the hours go faster – but I felt more useful in that simple and somewhat unpleasant task than I have in many years of easier labor. I knew that my efforts would be appreciated by the people who could use that space again, even if they had no idea who had cleaned the building or what had been involved in doing so. I saw in this process an allegory of my generation’s – and future generations’ – responsibility for cleaning up the messes left behind by those who came before.

Many of the tasks I performed during my week-long visit took on that sort of quality, as I delivered firewood, pruned fruit trees, watered vegetables in the greenhouse and helped patch holes in the driveway. The work was simple, manual, and required nothing from me intellectually, yet I found it highly rewarding and pleasant. Meal times at Alpha Farm were also quite enjoyable, as the residents took turns cooking for the group as a whole. Attendance was not mandatory for dinner, however, and on many evenings only a few people would arrive for the shared meal. I was again struck by the social value of frequent meals eaten as a group, and I reflected on all that has been lost in American culture by the separation of families into isolated houses. And while I definitely enjoyed the chance to have some privacy after interacting with a dozen people steadily throughout the day, it really was a great experience to be able to pop my head out of my room and pick up a conversation with most anyone passing by. It was an incredibly rich environment in terms of ideas, interactions, and the chance to explore topics from a wide range of different perspectives.

On a melancholy note, my visit coincided with the final week of the community's café and bookstore, Alpha-Bit. For most of the four decades of Alpha Farm's existence, Alpha-Bit served as their primary interface with the outside world, providing passers-by a chance to learn about the community, catch up on news and events, and enjoy local food and drink. The store also gave prospective members of the community a chance to demonstrate their work ethic and ease in to farm life through a sort of middle ground. I felt fortunate to be able to work for a day in the store before it closed, helping to clear out the attic and put out items for the going-out-of-business sale, which was followed by a

community dinner and celebration. I was struck by the outpouring of support from the people who traveled there for the final weekend, and I learned a great deal from the steady stream of stories they told about the community's impact on their lives.

Interestingly, Alpha-Bit also served as a valuable lesson about the nature of compromise in community life, as several members wanted to keep the store open, while others were glad to see it close due to the outpouring of energy and resources required to keep it going. I empathized with both positions, and found it difficult to watch the members preparing to close down a place that had become such a familiar part of their lives. Overall, though, I felt privileged to be present for a pivotal moment in the community's story, and I look forward to speaking with members again in a year or two to find out how circumstances have developed.

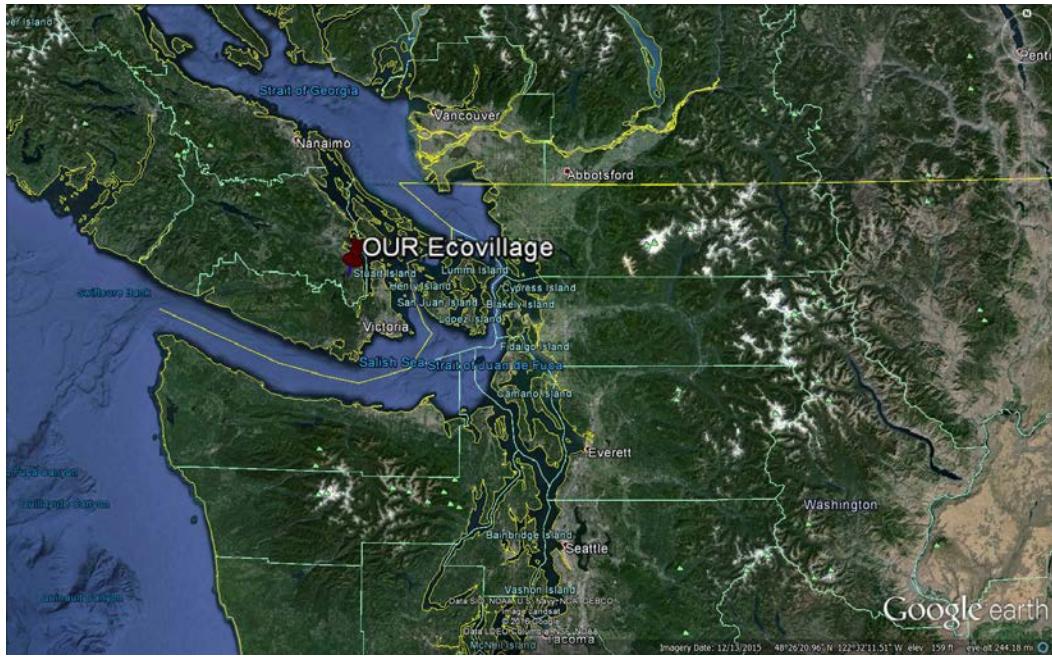


Figure 8: O.U.R. Ecovillage is located near Mill Bay on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. The site is about 45 minutes northwest of Victoria, the provincial capitol.

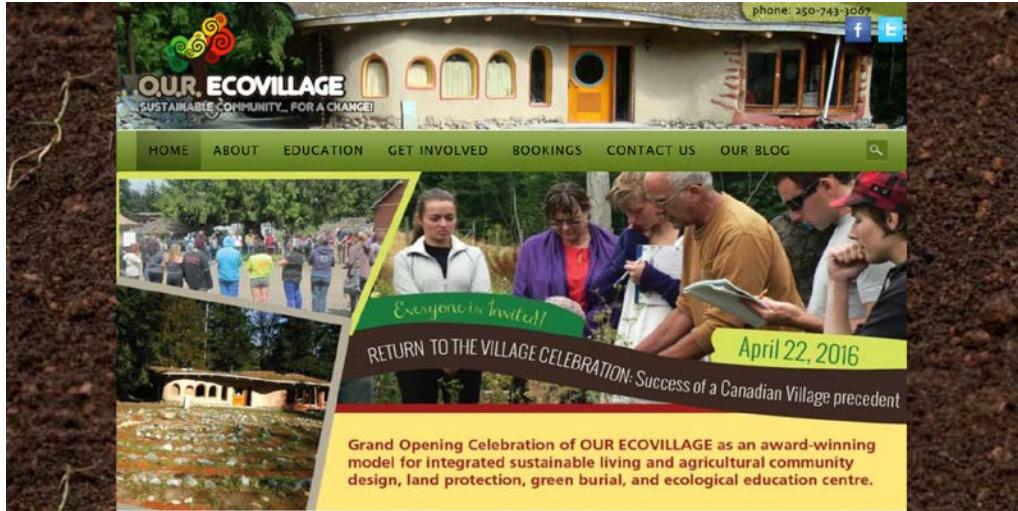


Figure 9: O.U.R.'s website – ourecovillage.org – features a logo of a tree with swirling rainbow branches, as well as pictures of cob buildings and skill-building workshops.

One United Resource (O.U.R.) Ecovillage

Geography. Located near the town of Mill Bay on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada, O.U.R. Ecovillage sits on 25 acres of rocky farm land. The site is accessed via a long gravel driveway that leads to a parking area near the community's Healing Sanctuary, the first legally-built cob building in Canada. The surrounding forest is a mix of Douglas fir, Sitka spruce, red cedar, white pine and many other species, with moss growing thickly in the wet climate. The main structure at O.U.R. is the Zero Mile Eatery, a large building housing an industrial kitchen, demonstration kitchen, dining area, classroom space, dorm rooms, bathrooms and a fireplace. Close by are other large structures including a bed and breakfast, a barn housing goats, sheep, and cows, a combination office space/living quarters/classroom area, and several small trailers, tiny homes and cob houses. Uphill from the Eatery is a broad, sparsely wooded plateau with a large pond and a cluster of nine homes that were in various stages of construction when I visited.

History. The community's website – ourecovillage.org – features a detailed description of the site's development that I have condensed below:

The idea of O.U.R. Ecovillage had its genesis in the early 1990s when a number of people lived in a cooperative household in Victoria. During this time the O.U.R. acronym (One United Resource) was created. ... Phase I (March 1999) involved the private purchase of 25 acres of land near Shawnigan Lake in order to secure it from future development. ... A group of approximately 14 people came together as the Creation Team, taking responsibility for the ongoing design and development process of the community project. Phase II (2000-2002) saw the establishment of O.U.R. Community Association, a registered not-for-profit ... In July 2007, we established O.U.R. Ecovillage Cooperative. The co-operative was created for the purpose of providing a legal model for the collective ownership of

the land and to provide a governance structure that will bring together all the earlier established organizations at O.U.R. and all interested parties. ...

Phase VIII (fall 2008 to present) has seen the launch of the Protect O.U.R. Ecovillage Forever Campaign, a campaign to first, purchase a covenant on the land in co-operation with The Land Conservancy of British Columbia, to protect the land and educational demonstration site into the indefinite future. And second, to hand the ownership of O.U.R. Ecovillage into community hands and release the land from conventional private ownership. (Ourecovillage.org, 2016)

Demographics. At the time of my visit (March 2016), there were half a dozen full-time residents at the ecovillage, but the population fluctuated almost hourly as people came and went seemingly from every direction. There were several volunteers and short-term interns on-site, as well as people renting rooms for a few weeks or stopping in for the day to work in the office or coordinate building activities. The community was also about to begin its spring and summer program schedule, meaning that nine homesteaders were set to arrive over the course of the week I was there, along with two dozen students on day trips, and numerous visitors, both expected and unannounced. It was very difficult to get a sense of any sort of average occupancy for the site, and I was told in an interview that the population sometimes drops below a dozen residents during the winter months, with as many as two dozen residents on-site during the peak of summer. Including visitors, students, and part-time residents, the site serves about 10,000 people per year, many of them visiting from universities and secondary schools.

Economics. School groups and educational activities provide considerable income for O.U.R., with visitors coming to stay for several days at a time and paying for meals and lodging, as well as program fees for workshops and skill-building classes. Donations of building materials, labor and all sorts of other goods are also a large part of the

economy, with many of the buildings constructed almost entirely from donated materials.

Some residents at the village work for the community's non-profit organization, while others teach yoga classes, do body work, cook, and perform numerous other jobs on-site and in surrounding communities.

Worldview/Vision. Describing their vision for the community as "Sustainable well-being for the land, ourselves, and our worldwide village," the members of O.U.R. position themselves in their Ecovillage Handbook (2016) as "Intercultural, Intergenerational, Interfaith and Interdependent." The group's mission is: "To educate, inspire and transform by co-creating a thriving learning community and permaculture demonstration site" (O.U.R. Ecovillage, 2016). The following passages are excerpts from the "Vision and Mission" and "Guiding Principles" sections of the Handbook (2016):

We are dedicated to researching and modeling ways that are rooted in social, cultural, spiritual, economic and ecological well-being. As well, we actively create partnerships with groups and organizations that are interested in living in community and living lightly on the earth.

O.U.R. ECOVILLAGE is a sacred space where permanent residents and short-term visitors co-create sustainable community. We offer a protected green space in a healthy, supportive environment and contribute locally and globally -- in return we live, love, laugh and learn together as an intentional learning community, we are interdependent, viable and prosperous through our deep connection to ourselves, each other and the earth.

To support this commitment and to help us to realize our needs over the long term we have identified a number of guidelines that serve as points of reflection and reference from which to model our communication and actions.

Responsibility – In all situations we intend to take responsibility for our own feelings. Ultimately, no one can make us feel. If we feel badly we take credit for that. If we feel good, we take credit for that too. Our words and actions may trigger and impact others, however, we take responsibility for using them in a way that doesn't manipulate or hurt others.

Openness – Besides death and taxes, there are few absolutes in this world. Various ways exist to interpret and work with a situation. When we actively let go of our fixed beliefs about ourselves, others or the world, we are more open to the

'truth' as communicated through our experience and the experience of others in the group. From this place anything is possible. We strive to remain open to negotiate, communicate and dance in all situations.

Respect – Respect is a two-way street. When we act with respect, we strengthen each other. This means we are conscious about not charging into people's mental or physical space without permission. Respect also means leaving the physical environment (land and dwellings) in the same or better condition than you found it, so all may enjoy.

Mutuality – It's give and take, baby! The more we give, the more we are open to receiving. It's as simple as that.

Honesty – Just be real. If you are happy, be happy, if you are sad, be sad. Through honesty we develop a deep trust in ourselves, which we can use to help others be honest.

Fun – Fun and humour [*sic*] keep things light and flexible so we can go beyond negativity. In fun environments we can relax, appreciate our lives together and learn from our experience. No matter what, we make time for fun in our lives.

Personal Observations. When I arrived in early March 2016, the community was in a transitional period between the lull of winter and the bustle of a hectic spring and summer. Even after three other village visits, it was almost overwhelming to meet so many new people all at once while trying to acclimate to a new schedule. Fortunately, there were several volunteers who had been on-site for a few weeks, and they began to give me a basic orientation as soon as I arrived. I made it to the community just before dinner time after a long couple of days of travel (two planes, a train, several bus transfers, two ferry trips and a truck ride from the ferry terminal) and I did my best to make conversation and keep myself awake long enough to get settled in and find a dorm bed. Luckily, the dorm was mostly empty and I was able to fall asleep that first night without much trouble.

As part of my volunteer agreement with O.U.R., I received meals in exchange for eight hours per day of work, and I paid for my dorm space separately. The work days

consisted of a wide variety of tasks, including cleaning up building sites; helping homesteaders and residents carry furniture and luggage as they moved in to their dwellings; hauling and shoveling sand for natural building projects; washing eggs from a large flock of chickens; weeding in the greenhouse gardens; and setting up bunk beds and other accommodations for new arrivals. Meal times were handled in a different way at O.U.R. than I had seen in other communities, with a chef on staff to cook a couple of times per week in order to make meal preparation smoother and easier. Most days, one or two people on a rotating list could easily handle reheating curries, soups, pasta dishes and other staples for lunch and dinner, while prepping a couple of salads that would feed a group of 10 to 15 people. Breakfasts were left to each individual, with some cereals, bread and fruit on hand. This system removed a great deal of the stress around meal preparation, especially given the large numbers of newcomers who had to be shown where all the cooking dishes and utensils were stored.

Since this was the last community I visited for this project, I spent a great deal of the time there talking over the ideas I had gathered at other sites along the way and asking for insights and perspectives from the people I met. I was struck time and again by the rich diversity of ideas and backgrounds brought by the people who are drawn to ecovillages, and I came to see these places as bustling hubs of activity and information exchange. People from all over the world seek out the skills being developed, rediscovered and passed on in ecovillages like O.U.R. (and all the others I visited), and in the course of a week I met travelers from Ireland, France, Quebec, Belgium, Colombia, Australia, Costa Rica and many more countries, states, and provinces I didn't have time

to ask about. Although visitors to ecovillages may only stay a few days or weeks in any given community, the ideas, strategies, and techniques they bring along with them cross-pollinate and create an incredibly complex network of shared information and influence. I cannot help but be more hopeful for the future after having witnessed this process, and I strongly encourage readers interested in these topics to seek out and experience ecovillages for themselves.

Interview Insights

I will now return to the central questions my thesis attempts to address, discussing them one at a time and exploring them with quotes and paraphrased insights drawn from the interviews I conducted. In order to preserve the anonymity of my sources, I have referenced these quotes by the names of the villages they were drawn from, and assigned each interview a unique letter based on the order in which it took place. In this way readers can identify quotes that came from the same people and follow the threads of these conversations more readily.

I would also like to acknowledge once again the limited and subjective nature of any attempt I can make to discuss the thoughts and experiences of other people. While I have made every effort to accurately document and convey the discussions I had with my co-participants, I recognize that my own perceptions and experiences unavoidably lead me to emphasize some aspects of these interviews and overlook others. What follows, then, is my own interpretation of the diverse stories and life experiences that these people shared with me.

Central Questions

How do ecovillagers describe their perceptions and experiences of the world?

At every site I visited, a majority of the ecovillagers I spoke with described a profound sense of alienation and disconnection they experienced while growing up in Western culture. Common experiences included a lack of close-knit family networks, a lack of fulfilling work opportunities, and a feeling of being cut off from other people and from natural cycles. Here's how one interview subject at O.U.R. Ecovillage described the situation:

What I think has happened in a lot of North America, at least for the last two generations if not three, is that people have not had access to learning a value system, a culture, with a deeply-rooted relational living experience. Most people have been cut off in environments or in cities – or in a lack of family – where they do lack community. Some kids lack access to going and walking on grass. ... So often, people haven't had something to value, and then they don't believe in anything and it becomes more and more isolating. I think the other thing ... is that technology connects us more but isolates us further. So I'm removed from relationship because my interface for the relationship too often becomes technology. And I think that's where some of the malaise, or the sickness if you will, of current culture in the North American scene comes from. There are lots of amazing leaders in the world who say that a lot of that is due to our lack of ritual and ceremony in the lineage of our cultures. We've lost the practices of relationship, of the sacred. (Interview T, OUR Ecovillage, March 2016)

These sentiments were echoed in various ways by almost all of the people I interviewed, and quite a few said they had not even realized they were missing something until they visited an ecovillage or intentional community and saw how different things could be.

Here's how a resident at The Farm put it:

I didn't really know it was lacking until I had it. ... I had a good set of friends [back home], but no one that I was really intimately friendly with or anything. Not on, like, a deeper level than just hanging out. No one was interested in my personal life or anything like that. ... But I didn't mind that because I didn't know

at the time that I was lacking something deeper. So getting here and being friends with all my neighbors and having them support us through hard times and just be there for us without asking – I've never had that before and I realized that that's definitely what we were missing. I feel like it's so vital to have that support all around you from like-minded people. Now that I know what it's like to have community, I don't know if I could go back to being without it! (Interview H, The Farm, July 2015)

Several of the people I spoke with described the feeling that their working lives in mainstream society were pointless and futile, and that the distractions provided by consumerism could not fill the void, ultimately leaving them feeling hollow and meaningless. Many people told me that they sought out intentional communities and ecovillages in an effort to rebuild their relationships with other humans and with the plants and animals they rely on for food. Another common theme was the idea that modern social structures (in the United States and other developed Western nations, at least) tend to isolate people from one another psychologically, while industrial agriculture separates most people from direct experiences of working with the Earth and other creatures in order to obtain food and water. These factors are seen as the root of a severe deficit in psychological/spiritual nourishment in the dominant culture. Here are quotes from several different people that offer perspectives on this topic:

Being somewhere like this, in a space like this, with the Earth and the plants and the trees and the animals, you feel a lot more open to the sun and the moon and the stars in the sky and the dirt. You just feel a lot more connected here. When I think of myself in the city – and I do like the city, too – but you're kind of ... it's like you're capped off, like there's a glass ceiling and you can only reach a certain level because you're actually being drained. Your energy is being zapped out of you from all of the external stimuli. (Interview R, OUR Ecovillage, March 2016)

In a city you can't be alone, in a way. ... You're so close in proximity to other people. You can look out your window and see into someone else's house, or if you're in an apartment building there's someone around the other side of a wall ...

it takes a lot of discipline to be truly reflective, I feel, in an urban environment, for me personally. If I really want to have some time to think, I have to go to the beach or the park. For me, the space to be able to go inwards requires external space as well. I wanted to be out and about in nature and I wanted to be using my body. I wanted to be getting stronger. I just felt like my personal health was paramount for me, and that moving out of the city for a while was crucial for that. (Interview F, Emerald Earth, June 2015)

[Author John Young] is really working on the premise that a human's connection with nature is a nutrient. More of a psychological nutrient, but that people need that to be fully healthy, to have some connection with nature. One of his core things that he encourages people to do is to have a sit-spot. And that's something you can do in your backyard. It's great to be able to do it here where we have quite a bit of nature around, but it's really something that one can do virtually everywhere. I guess if you are in an inner-city apartment building it might be tough, but you can still go out to a park or any sort of natural area, just sit on the balcony or something, and just observe what's going on with nature and the things that are there: the grasses and trees and birds that come by. (Interview A, Emerald Earth, June 2015)

Being in the forest is so good. It relieves your stress. Yeah, just pausing your brain. Because when you're at a job you're always thinking, thinking, thinking, and if you go back home and you have personal issues and you're still thinking, thinking. Whereas when you're walking in the woods, you don't need to think about anything, because everything just is. There's nobody there to judge you. There's nothing there to judge you. Nature and animals, they don't judge you. They just see you as what you are physically. It's a very powerful place. (Interview S, OUR Ecovillage, March 2016)

In addition to these ideas, most of the ecovillagers I spoke with expressed the feeling that industrialized societies are extracting resources and polluting the planet in completely unsustainable ways. Almost all of my interview subjects agreed that the globalization of industrial capitalism makes a worldwide economic and ecological collapse virtually inevitable. Many of them sought out ecovillages to remove themselves somewhat from systems that they consider morally and ethically objectionable, as well as

to seek some basic self-sufficiency if/when mainstream society undergoes systemic collapse:

Our society is just going to like implode and die. I think there's going to be some bloodshed. Another Great Depression is going to happen at least. ... It's not going to be peaceful at all. It can't be. The level of pure mass stupidity out there alone – just the people who are going to flock to whatever side. You've got to think that these people have no chance of survival. There are so many people out there who can barely get by, so these people are automatically going to go. It's just going to be horrible when things do get bad, but they will, and people are already dying all over the place and the economy is falling down. (Interview M, Alpha Farm, February 2016)

Well, personally, I don't think it's possible [to fix the current system] with the number of cities we have and the population of the country and the mouths that we have to feed. These views aren't conventional, and they're sort of not politically correct, but I think we need less people in this world. We need more farmers, we need more small communities. Cities, they suck the life out, they suck resources from the country. Cities are not sustainable. There are ways to make them more sustainable, but having that concentrated number of people in such a small place – it just, it doesn't work. ... So, as long as we have all these big cities, I really don't think things are going to change all that much. A lot of people like to say that it's about time for a good plague to wipe out about a third of the population. And it's true that it happens every couple hundred years or so. (Interview C, Emerald Earth, June 2015)

The world has to burn before something better happens, I think, which sucks, but it's true. The only way to do it is to just kind of destroy the current society. Well, it's destroying itself, so we don't have to do anything. We just have to sit back and watch it just go down in flames. Like, in my lifetime, it's going to happen. Shit's just going to hit the fan. I can feel it. It's getting there. ... I'm excited to sit and watch it burn. And from the ashes, something else will rise up. (Interview N, Alpha Farm, March 2016)

Obviously, these quotes do not represent the views of all ecovillagers or the official positions of the communities they were drawn from, but I found them to be powerful examples of a sometimes-unspoken undercurrent in the formation of ecovillages and intentional communities. Because of the perception that industrial capitalism will soon

reach several critical ecological limits and result in severe inequalities in the distribution of money, food, water, and energy, ecovillagers are actively seeking out more sustainable ways of life in order to figure out viable alternatives.

What aspects of ecovillagers' life experiences helped develop their worldviews?

Since most of the people I interviewed grew up in the United States and Canada, I wanted to explore the factors that might have led them to have such divergent views from mainstream cultural ideals as promoted in the media and expressed by politicians and business leaders. By “mainstream cultural ideals” I am referring to the currently dominant global paradigm that privileges economic growth at all costs, valorizes scientific rationalism, and assumes that human beings are the only beings that should be considered when making significant decisions. I found that most ecovillagers’ worldviews were in stark opposition to these values, and I will now attempt to identify several of the main factors that led to this divergence.

Based on the reports of my co-participants, the factors that strongly influenced their worldviews included immersive early experiences in natural settings (gardening, hiking, camping, and undirected play in forests and parks were all frequently cited); exposure to books and films with counter-culture themes that challenged the underlying assumptions of mainstream society (especially apocalyptic narratives and documentaries exposing problems inherent to capitalism); and transpersonal / entheogenic experiences with psychedelic substances. “Entheogens” are substances and/or activities that are said to “generate the divine within.” This category includes chemical compounds like dimethyltryptamine (DMT), lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), mescaline, psilocybin and

many other substances, as well as non-chemical activities such as drumming, dancing, singing, chanting, and meditating (Strassman, 2001; McKenna, 1992; Grof, 1988).

Because of my interest in the spiritual aspects of ecovillages, the entheogenic factor was especially interesting to me. I made a point not to ask people directly about these sorts of experiences due to the cultural and legal proscriptions against them, but several people mentioned psychedelic experiences to me spontaneously in the course of private conversations. I found that most people were understandably hesitant to discuss these experiences on the record, but I gathered that psychedelic / entheogenic experiences served as powerful catalysts for changing the worldviews of many people away from the hierarchical and individualistic attitudes common in mainstream Western culture toward the more egalitarian and communitarian worldviews commonly found in ecovillages.

Below are a few brief quotes from people willing to speak on the record about these transformative experiences:

I was 18 and I had an epiphany. I actually heard a voice. I was on psychedelics and I asked ‘What is the meaning of my life? What is my purpose?’ I was washing my face and this voice comes into my mind: ‘The purpose of your life is to build community.’ I looked up at myself and thought, ‘I can do that. I can totally do that.’ So this is my continued exploration of that practice. … That’s a big part of why I came to be here. (Interview F, Emerald Earth, June 2015)

Essentially, we had a dispute resolution or just general getting-the-group-head-together session either nightly or a couple times a week in most households on The Farm [during the formative years] … These would be sessions where people would sit around, maybe they’d smoke a joint, maybe they’d drink some peyote tea … They didn’t necessarily have to have anything, but usually there was something available that might lubricate the conversation. Alcohol was never used. Stimulants like coffee and tea were never used. It was just things that ‘opened the doors of perception,’ as Aldous Huxley said. And so, with perception opened, people would let the visions flood and just sit there until they were

looking at vibes and auras and reading peoples intentions -- what Stephen [Gaskin] liked to call ‘telepathy.’ (Interview G, The Farm, July 2015)

I've found there's no faster way to [connect with the divine] than to smoke DMT. It may not be the best way, like there are ways of getting there without DMT that have more -- it's more pure that way -- but for me personally, I first saw it through using hallucinogens, and then I started to seek it without hallucinogens. So that's where I'm at now. (Interview P, Alpha Farm, February 2016)

Far from being isolated or anomalous experiences, I found that psychedelic states of consciousness inspired a great many of the people I spoke with to reject mainstream values and worldviews in order to seek out lifestyles that more closely match their perceptions of interconnection and interdependence. My findings in this regard agree closely with the work of David Lawlor (2008) in his Humboldt State University thesis, “The Prospect Of Psychedelic Use As A Tool In Realizing A Transpersonal Ecology.” In that work, Lawlor clearly documents the links between psychedelics / entheogens and the development of *deep ecology* and *transpersonal ecological consciousness*, which I consider to be alternate terms for describing dark green religion and ecospirituality:

Deep ecology does not view humans as the most important life force at the top of an arbitrary, hierarchical chain of beings or as existing outside of nature. Rather, the philosophy sees human beings as a biological and spiritual component in a network or web of life that is interconnected throughout and with the earth. Through discourse incorporating Eastern thought, traditional Western culture and religion, American Indian culture, philosophy, ecology, and quantum physics, deep ecology attempts to abolish the classical dualism of man and nature ... In doing so, the philosophy fulfills the charge of realizing the oneness of all beings, does away with alienation and anthropocentrism, and embraces a new consciousness anchored in deep ecology’s ultimate norms of self-realization and biocentric equality. (Lawlor, 2008, p. 10)

Lawlor draw upon the works of Arne Naess, Terence McKenna, Derrick Jensen, Bill Devall, George Sessions, Stanislav Grof, Ralph Metzner, John Seed, Joanna Macy

and many others in crafting his arguments, providing compelling evidence that psychedelics / entheogens can serve as a powerful way “to catalyze a worldview that is radically different from the prevailing Western paradigm, to facilitate major quantitative shifts in the sense of identity, and to spark changes in meaning or significance” (Lawlor, 2008, p. 61). For many of the people I spoke with, these changes in meaning, significance, and identity caused a radical change in values and worldview, prompting them to create and/or seek out places where they could live out their perceptions of interdependence with like-minded others.

To what extent do ecovillagers in different communities share worldviews?

A great deal more research would be required to thoroughly answer this question, but I did find substantial areas of agreement in the visions, values, and worldviews of the ecovillagers I interviewed at sites widely separated geographically and temporally. A common theme in all of the villages I visited was the central role of tolerance and open-mindedness in the long-term success of these communities. Far from enforcing a specific worldview or set of beliefs on members, I found that the villages I visited made a point of accepting differences and drawing upon the unique backgrounds and perspectives of members. Even when the people I spoke with did not explicitly agree with each other about the details of a given subject, the vast majority of them were accepting of differences in opinion and willing to engage in meaningful dialogue with others so long as their positions were respected as well. I spoke with people who self-identified as agnostics, atheists, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and Wiccans, as well as people who considered themselves spiritual but not religious, and those who were so pluralistic that

they rejected labels entirely and combined elements of many different ideologies in constructing their worldviews.

Ideals similar to those in many indigenous cultures were extremely common, including deep respect for the Earth and non-human beings; a desire for reciprocity and communication with plants and animals; and the perception that the universe / the divine is manifest in all beings. Many co-participants explicitly referenced Native American and First Nations cultures in their descriptions of the factors that led them seek out ecovillages, and at least two of the communities I visited (Emerald Earth and O.U.R.) actively incorporate local indigenous elders into their land management decisions and cultural observances. This is accomplished by inviting representatives from local tribes to participate in decision-making processes and long-term planning, as well as celebrations and festivals.

Other commonly expressed perceptions in the interviews I conducted included the idea that ecovillages serve as laboratories and training grounds for cultural innovation, and that they will be essential as refuges and training centers if/when industrial civilization undergoes large-scale collapse. About half of the people I spoke with sought out ecovillages explicitly in order to learn practical skills they see as necessary for thriving in the midst of drastic environmental disruptions wrought by global climate change. About a quarter of my co-participants cited fears of increasing social inequalities wrought by neoliberalism and industrial capitalism as motivating factors for joining ecovillages.

In general, I found a broad range of social and political perspectives, but no one I spoke to expressed strongly conservative viewpoints. The overwhelming majority of ecovillagers I spoke with would be considered progressives, liberals, or greens in the current American political climate, based on my understanding of their points of view, but they often rejected these and other labels when I asked them to categorize their worldviews. I found that many of them were uninterested in electoral politics and considered their day-to-day lifestyles to be a more effective form of political statement than either democratic activism or more confrontational forms of protest. Several people told me that they came to community life after emotionally burning out from years spent in activism and social justice work.

In terms of the villages themselves, I found that O.U.R. and The Farm were generally more focused on educational outreach efforts and nonprofit enterprises, while Alpha Farm and Emerald Earth were more involved in working out group communication processes and taking care of the day-to-day tasks of growing food and providing for themselves. Each village had a different mixture of emphasis on food production, energy generation, natural building and social structures, but they all seemed to be heading in very similar directions in terms of their long-term goals and aspirations: seeking greater self-sufficiency in meeting basic needs, developing and teaching practical skills, and ultimately aiming to change cultural values internally and externally. The theme of intergenerational cultural change came up quite often in the conversations we had, as most of my co-participants expressed the idea that teaching children and youth how to live “closer to nature” is the best way to direct the values of coming generations toward

more egalitarian and communitarian worldviews, as well as to help them to survive in the event of climatic and social disruptions.

How is spirituality experienced, described, and enacted by ecovillagers in their daily lives, and what takes its place (if anything) for non-spiritual residents?

Most of the ecovillagers I spoke with expressed discomfort when asked if they identify with discrete mainstream religions or spiritual systems, preferring instead to incorporate elements from many different paths into their personal worldviews. Common sources of inspiration included Native American traditions, Shamanism, Animism, Pantheism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Paganism, Wicca, and Kabbalah. Below is a quote from a resident of Alpha Farm who offers a good overall summary of the perceptions of many ecovillagers when asked to describe “God” or “The Divine”:

The seer behind the eyes, the knower behind what’s known. Just pure awareness ... neither bad nor good. Without the mind, the mind can’t grasp it. Just pure consciousness and just pure being in the moment. Like, if you sit down by a river and inhale and pause your mind, for that split second where it seems like nothing else exists, that is pure divinity at that moment. And it’s the same within all of us. The same self in me is the same self in you, because it is without attributes. It’s just something that resonates. Just pure consciousness I guess is how I see it. ... I believe everything here is made of consciousness. The universe is consciousness. ... One of the things I really like about Kashmir Shaivism and Vedanta is that the world of matter is seen as illusionary and fake, and consciousness is all that matters. Kashmir Shaivism goes a step further when it says that ‘Yes, this is real, but it’s a play of consciousness.’ So I see the river as a play of my consciousness and your consciousness and everybody’s ... It’s all the same spirit. (Interview P, Alpha Farm, February 2016)

Interestingly, not a single person used the terms “ecospirituality,” “dark green religion” or “new ecological paradigm,” but I encountered many statements and attitudes that are clearly indicative of these worldviews:

I'm definitely more cognizant and aware of the wildlife and the landscape around me than I was [before living at Emerald Earth]. And that awareness, and my awareness of that awareness, is bringing me back to the Buddhist practices I did as a teenager. Because those are all about mindfulness ... so it's reawakening this desire to be more mindful and actually have a practice of being mindful. ...

I think in a way that is its own spirituality. Consciousness is the foundation of most spiritual practices, to be aware of the functioning of the mind in the environment ... and to then use that to cultivate the experience that you want to have. Recognizing that you have a lot of control over how you experience things. ...

I think that I'm naturally pretty receptive to the idea of honoring the Earth as something that is sacred. 'Sacred' to me means something that is larger than myself ... something that sustains me and that I consider to be larger than me. It will sustain the future generations as it sustained my ancestors. The thing about the world and about planet Earth is that nothing really goes away. It just becomes, you know, smaller particles like minerals and atoms, and so all the bones of my ancestors are in the earth and the sky and the water, and so in that way, everything around me is a continuing, holy witness. (Interview F, Emerald Earth, June 2015)

People expressed their understandings in many different ways, but their statements often contained direct and indirect references to the experiences and perceptions Lincoln (2000) labeled connection, tending, dwelling, reverence, and sentience:

Clay: So in terms of souls and spirits, how do you feel about things like trees and rocks and grass and animals and plants? What relationship do they have with 'spirit'? Do they have their own spirits?

Respondent: I definitely think so. They're all connected, almost like the internet of the forest. Everything is one. That's why it's so hard when you see a forest that has been clear-cut. I mean, like, that *hurts*. That actually physically hurts. ... Being somewhere like this, in a space like this, with the earth and the plants and the trees and the animals, you feel a lot more open, like even just to the sun and the moon and the stars and the sky and the dirt. You just feel a lot more connected here. (Interview R, O.U.R. Ecovillage, March 2016)

Clay: How do you think that people should interact with other animals and with plants and with the Earth?

Respondent: With respect. I love reading about Native American traditions where it was an honor to take that plant and you've got to give thanks to the Earth for giving you that plant. That kind of thing where it was just very respectful and you have a lot of respect for other beings. The Earth does provide, no matter what it is, it provides, and that's important. A lot of people take that for granted, not

knowing where their food comes from, or not caring, which I think is the worst. And then animals, too, should be respected, because they're all put here to be part of the ecosystem and they all have a role to play. ... I kind of take pieces of every religion to bring to my spirituality, because I feel like they all have really important lessons anyway. So it's always growing, it's always changing, but I feel definitely that's what everyone out here is kind of doing, too. We have every religion on The Farm that I can think of, but no one is discriminatory, like 'This is the way,' kind of thing. They're all different paths to the same kind of thing, and that's okay. (Interview H, The Farm, July 2015)

[Indigenous people had] a very kin-like relationship [with other species], referring to plants and animals as 'brother,' 'sister,' 'father.' So that's the overlay that I think needs to be reestablished: groups of people associated deeply with a place. That's the thing that we need to rebuild globally. ... You know, I really believe that honoring, thanking, talking to, praying to, listening to, communicating with the natural world – the things around us that I, in my life, I had never been taught to communicate with – is an absolutely essential part of it. ... So for me, it's like so much bigger than all these things we're doing that all of us get so caught up in ... and it's really about feeling and paying attention and having reverence. It's the most important of all of that, and it should be before everything else we do. It should come from that place. (Interview B, Emerald Earth, June 2015)

In terms of enacting their worldviews day-to-day, the ecovillagers I spoke with practiced their spirituality in a number of related ways, often through self-directed meditation in outdoor settings. This included solitary reflective walks along forest paths, individual and group meditation in homes, meadows, forests, and fields, and mindfulness practices during work activities like planting gardens and tending animals. Working with other species was often seen as a chance to communicate with non-human beings and to connect directly with the life-sustaining energies embodied in those beings, and people frequently spoke to garden plants, trees, and animals with familiarity and love:

Along the fence line leading over to [my daughter's] house, there's a sweat lodge standing there usually and there are these two cedars standing there. ... Well, for every day of my life of living here, I have touched those two aunts, those two aunties that are the cedar trees. They're not grandma cedars yet, but they're definitely aging aunties. And our relationship is so strong that twice in [my]

daughter's] life when my hands were full and someone was talking to me and I was in my own stuff and not being present, I walked through those trees and [my daughter] said 'Oh, you didn't touch those trees!' Because even when my hands are full, I bump my shoulders or my elbows and touch them to say 'Hello.' (Interview T, O.U.R. Ecovillage, March 2016)

In addition to observances like those described above, I found that crystals, rocks, shells, feathers and pieces of wood were commonly used to decorate public spaces, and both Emerald Earth and O.U.R. had groves of trees set aside as natural cathedrals with informal altars for offerings to friendly spirits. (The Farm and Alpha Farm may also have had similar areas, but I did not observe such places during my visits). Colorful murals and mosaics depicting Earth Goddess figures and other spiritual symbols were also common at all four sites.

Practices of gratitude figured prominently in the meal-time rituals at three out of the four communities I visited, with members joining hands before meals and either singing songs of thanks (Emerald Earth), kissing the backs of the hands of the people next to them (Alpha Farm), or verbally sharing things in their lives they were grateful for (O.U.R.). While I did not have the opportunity to attend a community dinner at The Farm to witness their practices in this regard, I was able to experience a Fire Ceremony during my time there, which consisted of participants circling a bonfire and ritually burning tobacco, cedar, sage, and sweetgrass as offerings of thanks. In my experience, even people who did not ascribe to spiritual worldviews reported finding practices of gratitude to be useful and fulfilling. For instance, a respondent at O.U.R. Ecovillage reported feeling very uncomfortable at first with rituals like the pre-meal gratitude circle because it closely resembled prayer, but after a few meals this person said they came to really

appreciate the opportunity to express gratitude and experience emotional openness on a level that had been discouraged in their early life. While still identifying as agnostic, this person described powerful feelings of connection, reverence, and fulfillment while living in the village:

There's definitely a connection with the plants. The food that we eat is from here, and there's definitely a lot more respect for the animals and the plants. There is good team play here, too, with the jobs that we have to accomplish. There's always something going on, and it's fulfilling to be volunteering here. ... I don't have to put on a mask when I'm talking, and I feel free here. It's one of the first times I've felt free in my life, I think. ... They encourage you to share your thoughts and your feelings ... just saying what you're grateful for in your life or your day or whatever. Yeah, it's a good thing for the community, but it's also a good thing to acknowledge what you're grateful for just for yourself. (Interview S, O.U.R. Ecovillage, March 2016)

In terms of experiences in nature versus life in cities, the same respondent described a sense of relief and acceptance when spending time in the forest:

[When I'm in nature] I can just be and not feel the need to think. Go with my heart and not my head. ... It's so good. It relieves your stress, just pausing your brain. ... When you're walking in the woods, you don't need to think about anything because everything just IS. There's nobody there to judge you. ... Nature and animals, they don't judge you, they just see you as you are, physically. It's a very powerful place. I feel sad for people who don't have the opportunities to go in nature. ... When you're in the woods that pressure inside just releases. You don't have to force anything. (Interview S, O.U.R. Ecovillage, March 2016)

One of the fascinating findings involved in this exploration was hearing from many people who generally share the elements of a spiritual worldview, but who find the trappings and language of commercialized spirituality to be tasteless and silly. Far from being hippy dippy spiritualists who uncritically accept the teachings of anyone purporting to be a guru, I found that the people I spoke with were rational and critical thinkers who developed their worldviews through extensive personal investigation and questioning:

Most spirituality is bullshit, and so is most religion. ... It's utterly ridiculous. And I make fun of lots of them. But on the other hand, anything that glues people together and gets them to a point where they see the best in each other and look at each other as brethren and 'sistren' – that's actually a huge deal. And so, I'm willing to overlook craziness in religions and dichotomies or dualities in spiritual pursuits because of the benefits of tribalism and familiarity and oneness that come with those pursuits. ...

[Sometimes] I have to silently hold my nose at the stink of spirituality, because in actuality what they're setting up is a dichotomy, and there is no dichotomy. They're setting up a dichotomy between God up here and us down here: 'And we must aspire to become more God-like, but God in his favor will give us hardship ...' You know, all that shit. And it's like 'Hey man, we ARE That. That IS us.' There is no distinction. It's all one thing. There's quantum entanglement from the microbes in the soil to what makes rain in the atmosphere. It's all of a piece. There's an interconnected vibration of energy that runs through it all, and believe me that there is no separation! ...

There's no dichotomy, and when I go to [a spiritual gathering] or sit with a Hindu master or go through some other kind of ceremony like that, I sit on my heels and go through it and burn the incense with everybody else respectfully, but personally, I feel sorry. (Laughs) Because they don't get it yet. They don't get it that it's all one. (Interview G, The Farm, July 2015)

Due to the perception that mainstream society dismisses spiritual discourse, several respondents said they had learned to describe their beliefs and understandings in scientific terms when speaking with outsiders and even sometimes family members:

With atheistic people, often I'll tell them that I'm an environmentalist and that I just want to live a more environmentally-friendly lifestyle. A lot of my family doesn't understand my spirituality, so when I talk to them about it I leave spirituality out of it and I just tell them that 'Oh, I do this because I'm an environmentalist and I want to live in a way that's better for the planet.' And I'll also explain that I want to live in a culture that's outside of mainstream culture. So I kind of simplify it and leave things out, but still say what I mean, sort of. (Interview P, Alpha Farm, February 2016)

While it was somewhat uncommon during my visits to encounter people who described themselves as atheistic, agnostic, or non-spiritual, I did meet a few people who fell into those categories, and it was very interesting to speak with them about their

experiences. I found that many of these people were reluctant to use spiritual language due to negative experiences with religion during their childhood and teen years, but when prompted to elaborate on their perceptions of living in ecovillages and spending time in nature, they used extremely similar concepts to describe their experiences as those used by their spiritual counterparts. Specifically, ideas drawn from scientific disciplines including quantum physics, evolutionary biology, and ecology were often used to describe perceptions of interconnection, interdependence and the need to develop deep respect for the planet's self-regulating processes.

I was an agnostic, a militant agnostic. Like, 'I don't know and you don't either!' That kind of agnostic. But I wondered when I came to The Farm because these were the most successful bunch of people I'd ever seen. Not only from a material place, even with the vow of poverty, but, you know, happy, fulfilled, smiling, cracking high-level jokes. They would talk about 'spirits' and 'vibes' and the soul and life and death. And I listened and I thought, 'You know, this would be a great place to do research. To find out what this is all about, first of all, and then to see if I could put it together with the scientific principles of induction and deduction and internal consistency and observables and measurables and that kind of thing. See how far I could get with an understanding of spiritual matters from the scientific point of you.'

Because after all, it's got to be one universe, it can't be separate universes, one which is spiritual and made from God, and the other which is a playground for scientists and rational people. There's got to be some kind of a bridge or a connection between these two universes, you know. So what the hell is it? ...

So anyway, I asked [a member] about [their religion] when I first hit the gate, and I said ... 'Well, what's your concept of God?' and he said, 'Well, we think that God is everything.'

And I said, 'What? God is everything? You mean like, 'God is IN everything,' like immanent and all that stuff?' And he said, 'No, no, no. Not Spinoza. None of that stuff. Just that everything IS God. You, me, the tin can on the side of the road and everything else.' And I said, 'No kidding? Well that's pretty interesting. I can't think of anything greater than that. So how do I sign up?' [Laughs] He had me by the conceptual short-hairs. ...

Knowing that we're all one was one of the principles that I was really in agreement with, because one of my original spiritual teachers, Albert Einstein, said we have our differences and our wars and stuff, but when you really consider

it, all human beings are so much alike: We all hunger. We all bleed. We all love our children and our wives or husbands. We all want peace, basically. ... [The Farm's spiritual worldview] cut across all the belief systems, all the religions, all this stuff. We were just trying to be normal by cosmic standards. (Interview I, The Farm, July 2015)

I find statements like the one above very encouraging in terms of the project described in this thesis, because I believe that it demonstrates how much potential there is to build understanding between people at relatively different ends of the continuum between science and spirituality. Regardless of whether people are using scientific or spiritual metaphors for describing their experiences, I believe that they are often talking about very much the same kinds of perceptions when it comes to a sense of interconnection with the Earth and a feeling of reverence for the environment due to its life-sustaining properties.

To what extent do the worldviews, values, visions and actions of spiritual and non-spiritual ecovillagers overlap?

Acknowledging once again the limited nature of my sample size and ability to generalize, I can say with some confidence that in my experience the worldviews, etc., of spiritual and non-spiritual ecovillagers overlap quite a bit. I phrased my initial question this way in order to challenge myself to look for correspondences as well as differences between these ways of describing the world, and I found out quickly how pointless it is to attempt to divide people into categories and apply labels to their experiences. Most of my co-participants resisted this categorization implicitly, emphasizing that they were always changing and learning, neither spiritual nor non-spiritual, but simply human beings

exploring the world and attempting to express some small fraction of their experiences through the limited medium of language.

No matter how they described themselves on the spiritual spectrum, I found that all the ecovillagers I spoke with were seeking healthy food, clean water, beautiful homes, a sense of family and community, connection with the plants and animals they rely on for food, and a bit of separation from mainstream social structures they perceive as destructive, judgmental, degrading, and ultimately meaningless. Unsurprisingly, those who think of the world in spiritual terms tended to diagnose the problems they perceive in mainstream society as a spiritual sickness or lack of “higher consciousness,” while those who considered themselves agnostic or atheist described these same problems in political, economic, and social terms. I see these differences as a crucial area for further research, since the solutions necessary to deal with the problems we face will be different depending on our collective perceptions about the source of the problems.

In terms of values, visions, and actions, I found that most of the people I spoke with were very much on the same page. Nearly everyone, regardless of their thoughts on spirituality, valued close relationships with their friends and neighbors; cared about their impacts on the Earth and other species; were actively trying to live more lightly and frugally in order to conserve resources; hoped to inspire change in mainstream society through example and education; and sought out meaningful actions day-to-day to improve their communities and the world around them. A co-participant at Emerald Earth coined the term “repletion” to describe this desire to not only stop taking so much from the Earth, but to actively give back and begin repairing the damage that has been done:

'Repletion' is the opposite of depletion. It's the idea that wherever we're at, we have a potential for engaging with an area so that it is more replete with species, with soil fertility – we can always add more. There's always some other species that could be there. It's about adding to, rather than subtracting from. ... I'm just really excited about this notion that we could create a culture that participates productively in the ecosystem. ... There's this notion that you walk to the store instead of driving or you recycle cans and you feel like, 'Oh, I'm doing something for the environment!' But all you're doing is just reducing your impact on the environment, you're not yet in that positive realm where you're contributing. So that's why I'm saying, that's sort of the frontier: What can people actually do to positively impact the ecosystem? And if we could get six billion people doing one thing once a year, that would be huge! (Interview A, Emerald Earth, June 2015)

Permaculture was an especially popular philosophy / system of design that was referenced by many of the people I spoke with, and it appears to have great potential for exporting some of the best aspects of ecovillage design to mainstream suburbs and cities. While small-scale ecovillages of the type I visited could never accommodate the massive populations of mainstream settlements, many ecovillagers pointed out that permaculture design principles could readily be incorporated into existing towns and cities in ways that would vastly improve their livability and sustainability in economic, ecological, social, and spiritual terms. Specifically, common suggestions included an emphasis on redesigning roads and other public spaces to allow for walking, biking, and increased face-to-face social interaction; removing fences in suburban neighborhoods in order to create shared gardens, orchards, and community buildings; and overhauling small-group social/political processes to allow for consensus and/or "sociocratic" (Endenburg, 1998) governance models.

All of my sources agreed that living in an ecovillage or any other type of intentional community requires a willingness to work on oneself and to face personal

problems and emotional baggage honestly and directly. People following spiritual paths used those frameworks to direct their self-reflection, while people who preferred secular guidance seemed to rely more heavily on social facilitation processes like non-violent communication (Rosenberg & Rosenberg, 2003) and group sharing meetings where thoughts and feelings could be expressed openly:

If there's something inside that hurts, if there's something inside that needs work, people who are going to go live in community with others need to be very conscious of where they're at, and they need to be accepting – very accepting. They need to have a lot of self-acceptance. One does not need to be perfect to move into community. One does not need to be healed. One does not need to be happy, but one does have to have self-awareness and self-acceptance and self-love, at least, where they won't let their shit influence the way they treat other people. You have to at least have the beginning of a practice that allows you to have mindfulness with yourself. I'd say that's really important. . . .

You have to know what your patterns are, what your crossed wires are, what your triggers are. You've gotta fucking be down to study up on communication if you haven't already. You've got to be ready to be the best version of yourself that you're prepared to want to be. Come wounded. Come unhappy, but come prepared to work on that. Come prepared to be the best version of yourself that you can be, and be prepared to reap the wonderful rewards of that experience. (Interview F, Emerald Earth, June 2015)

I will turn now to the Discussion section to offer a few final thoughts on the insights and ideas described above, and to suggest avenues for further research and exploration.

DISCUSSION

So What's the Story?

As I hope the preceding sections have made clear, there are a great many similarities between the new ecological paradigm, dark green religion, ecospirituality, deep ecology, and the worldviews of the ecovillagers I spoke with. Through this work, I have come to see ecovillages and intentional communities as vital places where people are rediscovering and retelling stories that have existed in various forms since our species became fully human. I will now discuss several of the encouraging insights I gathered from my research.

In brief, as I understand it, the dominant paradigm of Western culture is based on the assumptions that civilization is a natural progression or evolution of human culture; that “uncivilized” peoples must be forcibly civilized; that human beings are the only conscious animals, and thus the only beings deserving of respect and consideration; that nature is fundamentally hostile and must be subdued in order to guarantee survival; and that technological development and economic growth are the best measures of progress and well-being. In contrast to this view, the paradigm out of which ecovillages are emerging asserts that the current version of civilization is just one path among many different possible ways of life; that human beings are no more or less valuable than other life forms; that our well-being and health depends on the health and well-being of the plants and animals that share our home; and that we have a responsibility to control our

consumption and population so that enough resources are available for all people – and as many other species as possible – to survive and thrive.

Anthropologists have documented many indigenous cultures all over the world that have managed to live in dynamic equilibrium with natural systems for thousands of years without exhausting their resources (Jensen, 2000; Davis, 2009; Quinn, 1991 & 1996), demonstrating clearly that human nature is not fundamentally rapacious, exploitative, and destructive. The huge range of cultural differences evident in the world are proof that humans are highly malleable and adaptable by nature, and that we can be taught to interact with the world in healthy and productive ways, as well as destructive and unsustainable ways (and, of course, in every combination of those extremes).

The upshot of all this is that the ecological destruction and social disruptions caused by industrial capitalism are not inevitable consequences of human nature, but alterable choices influenced by a set of faulty cultural assumptions (i.e. that natural resources are inexhaustible; that money is more valuable than a clean air, water, and food; that the whole planet belongs to our species alone; etc...). These assumptions, and the stories and institutions that arise out of them, are powerful forces that cause people to act irrationally and unsustainably, but the good news is that assumptions, stories, and institutions can be changed much more easily than human nature.

Daniel Quinn (1996) illustrates this idea to great effect in his novel “The Story of B,” in which he argues that the rapaciousness of the dominant culture – “Taker culture” – is based on a kind of blindness he calls “the Great Forgetting.” Quinn argues that

what was forgotten in the Great Forgetting were several fundamental laws that govern the ability of a species to survive and thrive on this planet:

There's a drug known as angel dust or PCP that has the effect of blinding people to their physical limitations and vulnerability. Under its influence, people will manically plunge into feats that are beyond the design limitations of the human body, so that they heedlessly break bones, rip flesh and tear ligaments, imagining themselves to be indestructible, only becoming aware of the damage they've done to themselves when the drug wears off. ...

Just as angel dust blinds its users to the fact that they're flesh and bone, the Great Forgetting blinds us to the fact that we are a biological species in a community of biological species and are not exempt or exemptible from the forces that shape all life on this planet. The Great Forgetting blinds us to the fact that what cannot work for any species will not work for us either. ...

[T]he Great Forgetting fostered the delusion that the world was empty of humans until the people of our culture made their appearance just a few thousand years ago. As a corollary of this delusion, it was understood that our culture was not only the first and original human culture, but the single culture that God intended for all humankind. These delusions remain in place today globally—East and West, twins of a common birth—even though the true (and well-known) story of human origins obviously gives them no support at all.

As the foundation thinkers of our culture reconstructed the story, humans appeared in the world with an instinct for civilization but of course no experience. They soon discovered the obvious benefits of communal life, and from there the course of civilization was clear. Farming villages grew into towns, towns grew into cities, cities grew into kingdoms, and so on. ...

Roughly speaking, this is what the foundation thinkers imagined, and this is what became the received wisdom of our culture, embedded in all social thought—and in the textbooks used by schoolchildren around the globe, even to the present moment. Needless to say, it's about as close to the truth as the fairy tale that babies are delivered by storks. (1996, p. 307-309)

Far from being an inevitable progression or evolutionary leap, Quinn argues that modern civilization is based on a cultural anomaly that originated in the myths of the Middle East and began to infect other cultures like a virus. Fueled by “totalitarian agriculture,” which seeks to maximize human food production at all costs, and guided by a cultural vision that considers all other ways of life to be inferior and uncivilized, Taker

culture expanded militarily and through cultural attrition, absorbing and eradicating most of the other ways of life on the planet. While a few isolated tribal groups continue to live traditionally at the time of this writing, their lifestyles and cultures are under constant threat and are very likely to be radically altered or eradicated by the middle of this century.

Based on my interviews with ecovillagers and my reading of the literature about these places, it seems clear to me that many people are desperately seeking alternative ways of life because they feel trapped in dead-end jobs, disconnected from extended family networks and long-term friendships, and cut-off from the nourishment of working directly with nature. And all of these are just First World problems for the people privileged enough not to be currently suffering from violence, racial and religious persecution, starvation, drought, natural disasters intensified by climate change, or any of the myriad other indignities large and small visited upon us by a sick and dying culture.

In order to survive and thrive as Western civilization begins to collapse under the weight of its ecological excess, we desperately need places of physical refuge as well as more sustainable stories that can replace the destructive myths of the dominant cultures. I think that's where ecovillages and intentional communities have a role to play. These places are far from perfect, and they come with their own sets of frustrations, irritations, misunderstandings, and shadow sides, but I see them as powerful incubators for developing and testing out sustainable cultural practices and new stories that can help to redefine what it means to have a fulfilling and meaningful life as human beings in the 21st century.

Finally, in order to acknowledge the indigenous origin of many of these ideas, I will end this section with a few passages from *Basic Call to Consciousness* (Notes, 1978), a book prepared by representatives of the Haudenosaunee people – commonly called the Six Nations Iroquois – as position papers for the United Nations in 1977:

In the beginning, we were told that the human beings who walk about the Earth have been provided with all the things necessary for life. We were instructed to carry a love for one another, and to show a great respect for all the beings of this Earth. We are shown that our life exists with the tree life, that our well-being depends on the well-being of the vegetable life, that we are close relatives of the four-legged beings. In our ways, spiritual consciousness is the highest form of politics. ...

We believe that all living things are spiritual beings. Spirits can be expressed as energy forms manifested in matter. A blade of grass is an energy form manifested in matter—grass matter. The spirit of the grass is the unseen force that produces the species of grass, and it is manifest to us in the form of real grass. All things of the world are real, material things. ... The spiritual universe, then, is manifest to man as the Creation, the Creation that supports life. We believe that man is real, a part of the Creation, and that his duty is to support life in conjunction with the other beings. ...

The original instructions direct that we who walk about on the Earth are to express a great respect, an affection, and a gratitude toward all the spirits that create and support life. We give a greeting and a thanksgiving to the many supporters of our own lives—the corn, beans, squash, the winds, the sun. When people cease to respect and express gratitude for these many things, then all life will be destroyed, and human life on this planet will come to an end. ...

Today, man is facing the very survival of the human species. The way of life known as ‘Western Civilization’ is on a death path, and its culture has no viable answers. When faced with the reality of its own destructiveness, Western civilization can only go forward into areas of more efficient destruction. ...

The air is foul, the waters poisoned, the trees dying, the animals are disappearing. We think even the systems of weather are changing. Our ancient teaching warned us that if man interfered with the natural laws, these things would come to be. ...

It is necessary at this time to begin a process of critical analysis of the West’s historical processes, to seek out the actual nature of the roots of the exploitative and oppressive conditions that are forced upon humanity. At the same time, as we gain an understanding of those processes, we must reinterpret that history to the people of the world. It is the people of the West, ultimately, who are most oppressed and exploited. They are burdened by the weight of centuries of

racism, sexism, and ignorance, which has rendered their people insensitive to the true nature of their lives. ...

The people who are living on this planet need to break with the narrow concept of human liberation and begin to see liberation as something that needs to be extended to the whole of the Natural World. What is needed is the liberation of all the things that support life—the air, the waters, the trees—all the things that support the sacred Web of Life. ...

[C]olonized peoples in the West would be well-advised to place considerable energy into the creation of true liberation theologies as a very high priority. Liberation theologies are belief systems that challenge the assumption, widely held in the West, and that the Earth is simply a commodity that can be exploited thoughtlessly by humans for the purpose of material acquisition within an ever-expanding economic framework.

A liberation theology will develop in people a consciousness that all life on Earth is sacred and that the sacredness of life is the key to human freedom and survival. It will be obvious to many non-Western peoples that it is the renewable quality of Earth's ecosystems that makes life possible for human beings on this planet, and that if anything is sacred, if anything determines both the quality and future possibility of life for our species on this planet, it is the renewable quality of life.

The renewable quality – the sacredness of every living thing, that which connects human beings to the place they inhabit – that quality is the single most liberating aspect of our environment. Life is renewable and all the things that support life are renewable, and they are renewed by a force greater than any government, greater than any living or historical thing. A consciousness of the web that holds all things together, the spiritual element that connects us to reality and the manifestation of that power to renew that is present in the existence of an eagle or a mountain snowfall, that consciousness was the first thing that was destroyed by the colonizers.

A strategy for survival must include a liberation theology – call it a philosophy or cosmology if you will, but we believe it to be a theology – or humankind will simply continue to view the Earth as a commodity and will continue to seek more efficient ways to exploit that which they have not come to respect. If these processes continue unabated and unchanged at the foundation of the colonizers ideology ... sooner or later we will exploit our environment beyond its ability to renew itself. (Notes, 1978, p. 85-125)

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Stories are powerful things, and I am convinced that to have any real chance of altering the death path Western culture is on, we must address our collective efforts to relearning and sharing sustainable stories about what it means to have a good life and to live ethically and responsibly on this beautiful and finite planet. We must find ways to show the coming generations of people an entirely different way of being in the world from that which currently predominates, and it seems to me that the only way to do this is by example.

In the preceding chapters, I have attempted to describe a set of worldviews that I consider to be healthier, saner, and more in keeping with the principles of modern science than the currently dominant paradigm. My hope for the stories emerging in ecovillages and intentional communities is that they will serve to remind present and future generations that we are inseparably connected to the plants, animals, and other life forms that share our home, and that we must redevelop our relationships with these beings and with the Earth itself in order to survive. By doing so, I believe that we can once again learn to live within the biological and physical limits of our ecosystems, rather than seeking to exploit them to the point of destruction for short-term personal gain.

Obviously, I hope that the present generations alive on Earth can learn these lessons quickly and change our collective ways in time to avert catastrophic climate change and major socio-economic disruptions, but I must confess that I am not optimistic about that possibility. I consider it far more likely that we will be unable to halt the self-

destructive trajectory of our current civilization, and I agree with my co-participants that an economic-social-ecological collapse is virtually inevitable by the end of this century. This is not to say that the world is ending or that humanity as a species will go extinct, but I expect that we will be forced to drastically alter our lifestyles and ways of thinking as resources grow scarcer, the climate becomes more chaotic, and global inequalities contribute to increasing violence and mass migrations. This perception is part of what lead me to explore ecovillages and intentional communities in the first place, because I, too, would much rather have a close-knit community around me and some basic infrastructure in place should it become necessary that I must provide my own food, water, and energy.

But regardless of whether civilization undergoes significant contractions or even a full-scale collapse in the coming decades, it seems to me that ecovillages and intentional communities represent some of the best possible responses to the myriad problems plaguing our current ways of life. They offer people the opportunity to reconnect with food systems and nourishing natural environments; they can be constructed much more cheaply and healthily than conventional settlements by using natural building techniques, recycled materials, and volunteer labor; they function as social laboratories for developing more egalitarian ways of living; and they provide at least the possibility for basic self-sufficiency in terms of food, water, and power. I recognize that none of these places are ideal and that there are many aspects remaining to be worked out and improved, but I believe that the advantages and possibilities far outweigh the difficulties.

Suggestions: The Sanctuary Concept

The final idea I would like raise concerns the possibility of creating ecovillages and intentional communities that could offer essential social services currently lacking in mainstream American society, as well as in many other countries. Specifically, I believe that ecovillages are ideally suited to become sanctuaries for orphans and foster youth who are severely underserved by existing social support systems. In California alone, 62,097 children were in the foster care system in 2014 (“Number of Children in Foster Care - Kidsdata.org,” 2016), and despite the best efforts of tens of thousands of dedicated social workers, case managers, teachers, and foster parents, multiple studies have shown that foster and adopted youth in the current system have a greatly increased risk of homelessness (40% higher than average), criminal convictions (60% higher than average) and substance abuse (50% higher than average) (Webster, 2016).

By providing homes and surrogate families for orphans and foster youth, I believe that ecovillages could serve vital and powerful roles in improving the lives of countless people, all while furthering their own missions and highest intentions to create change in the world culturally and inter-generationally. Many of the ecovillagers I spoke with expressed the desire to bring in committed, long-term members to their communities; provide life-changing experiences for youth; and to help create a new culture with a healthier story that will allow our species to come back into balance with the Earth. Many of these same people also identified the need for a compelling shared vision that could motivate people in different villages and in the mainstream to work together and pursue

more ambitious projects collaboratively. Personally, I can think of no more compelling vision than to improve the lives of neglected and abandoned children by providing them with homes in beautiful natural environments; teaching them practical skills along with state-mandated educational standards; and creating surrogate family networks and life-long social bonds for people who would otherwise very likely fall through the cracks of society.

Clearly, these projects would require close collaboration with state and federal authorities to ensure the safety and well-being of the children and youth involved, but I feel strongly that these sanctuary villages could lead to far better outcomes than the current systems, at a fraction of the current costs (both economically and socially). After meeting many adults who grew up in ecovillages, and several children currently growing up in them, I am convinced that the phrase “It takes a village to raise a child” is more of a truism than a cliché. The children I met in these places were all well-nourished and cared for, with abundant opportunities for social interaction, undirected play in nature, and close social bonds with their communities. They were learning practical skills like plant identification, gardening, cooking, natural building, carpentry, permaculture design, and much more, all while being taught to respect one another and the Earth; to express gratitude for the sources of their food, water, and shelter; and to recognize the human and non-human beings around them as valuable and worthy of kindness and consideration.

I sincerely hope to be able to participate in the creation and development of these types of communities in my future work, both for my own family’s sake and for the sake of coming generations. I would encourage academic readers interested in these topics to

research the social outcomes of children raised in ecovillages and intentional communities in order to gain an understanding of recommended practices and guidelines for these places, as well as to explore the many other rich areas of innovation and collaboration being created by ecovillagers in their daily lives and experiences.

In closing, I would like to express my gratitude for the time and attention of readers, and for the opportunity to participate in this work. I would also like to thank, once again, all of the people who helped to make this project possible. No endeavor of this scope is ever produced by one person alone, and the ideas and insights I gathered on these journeys have shaped my understandings and perceptions in numerous ways. I have done my best to communicate these ideas accurately and clearly, and I hope this work encourages at least a few readers to seek out and explore ecovillages and intentional communities for themselves. As I see it, through the power of perception, the people I met – and many others like them – are building a better world, one ecovillage at a time. And they need all the help they can get.

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